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CON OF MISTY MOUNTAIN

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BY

49 MARY T. WAGGAMAN

Author of "Billy Boy," "Tommy Travers," "The Secret
of Pocomoke," "Killykinick," "White Eagle," etc.



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CON OF MISTY MOUNTAIN

I.—CON

It was a hard winter on Misty Mountain,—a winter bleak and pitiless for man and bird and beast. Jack Frost had come early this year,—no merry monarch, but a grisly old despot, that not even Misty Mountain with all its golden glamour could defy. The trees that usually flaunted their gay banners far into November, stood bare and shivering in the icy blasts before Thanksgiving; the birds had fluttered off early to warmer skies; all the furry little forest dwellers scuttled to shelter before half their harvesting was done. And to-day "Mountain Con" (he knew no other name), like the wild human thing he was, had come out with his hoarded nuts, to set traps for the unwary little creatures whose winter larders were unfilled.

For the "boys" were scattered in the hard-packed snows, and even old "Buzzard Bill" himself had vanished for the last fortnight. There was scant living up on the high steep of "Buzzard Roost," as crippled Mother Moll had whimpered when she dealt Con out his coarse mush this morning. Mush is but light diet on a crisp December day for a sturdy lad of twelve, and Con had set out to get a rabbit or squirrel for Mother Moll's pot for dinner. With a root of the wild garlic drying in her smoky kitchen, and a few potatoes filched from some farmer's open bin, it would be all the stew a hungry boy could ask.

For food and shelter were as yet the only needs that Con's young life knew. He had grown up like the other wild creatures of Misty Mountain,—lithe, strong and bold, but all unconscious of mind or heart or soul; a splendid, sturdy fellow, with a shock of yellow hair that seemed to have caught the sunshine in its tangles, eyes blue and bright as the summer sky, and a bright, brave young face that laughed hunger and cold and hardship to scorn; for poor Con in his brief twelve years of life had known little of

love or comfort or care. But he had learned many things in these twelve wild years that neither books nor schools can teach. He set traps to-day with a practised hand, brushing aside the snow with a dead branch, lest track or scent should betray him; then, bounding off lightly to a more sheltered hollow, flung himself down on the ground to wait for the furry little victims of his snare.

It was Christmas Eve, but Con knew nothing of such blessed festivals. Neither Old Bill, hoary sinner that he was, nor his "boys" kept account of them; and poor old Mother Moll's memory had been seared into dull forgetfulness by years of sorrow and toil. But though no stocking nor tree nor gift, nor any of the holier blessings that these earthly joys typify, had a place in Con's thoughts, he was vaguely conscious of a pleasant thrill as he lay back upon the snow, his yellow head cushioned in his sturdy clasped hands. Perhaps it was the thought of a rabbit stew for dinner, or the warmth of the winter sunbeams caught on this cleft of the mountain, or the cheery glimpse of berry and vine clinging to the rocks above, where, screened by the beetling cliffs,

some hardy winter growth was flourishing amid the snow.

Well, whatever Christmas cause it may have been, Con lay most comfortably and happily in his ambush, when a sudden sound of voices made him start to his feet in fierce, breathless guard. Boys,—boys from the Gap, the Valley; boys coming up here to frighten off his game, break his traps; boys, who had only taunts and jeers for wild Con of the mountain whenever they met! And Con's blue eyes flamed with sudden fire as he backed up against the rocks, and, grasping a handful of snow, hardened it in his strong young grip into a ball, that would start the fight he felt was to come. On they came, half a dozen or more of them. Con felt his blood boil in fiercer defiance. When had they ever come upon him in such numbers before? Dick Dodson and Jimmy Ward and Tommy Randall and Pat Murphy! Con's young muscles tightened, his breath came quick. He would hold his own against them all.

"Halloo!"

It was red-headed Dick Dodson that first caught sight of the ragged young outlaw of Misty Mountain. Dick had

cause to remember Con. Not three months ago they had met in a passage of arms at the Mill, where Con had gone for a sack of meal. The adventure had resulted rather disastrously for Dick. He had worn a patch over his left eye for a week, and had prudently avoided Con's ways ever since. But the strength of numbers was behind him now, and Con was alone.

"Halloo!" shouted Dodson. "Boys,—boys! Here's Buzzard Con! Look out for the henroosts! The Buzzard's on the hunt."

"Look out for yourself, you red-headed weasel," flamed back Con. "I'll shut up one of them squint eyes of yours agin. Stand back, the hull lot of ye! Ye ain't going to tech my traps, if I have to fight you all!"

"Buzzard! Buzzard! Buzzard!" rose up the mocking chorus. "Let's see what he's got behind him, boys! It's somebody's Christmas turkey, sure."

And there was a rush at Con, but he was ready for it. One icy snowball caught Pat Murphy on the bridge of his nose; another, that Con had snatched in his left hand, knocked Jimmy Ward dizzy; then, grasping the lighter ammunition around him, the fight was on. The battle waged

fierce and fast, but it was six to one. Con was making his last stand, with vengeful Dick Dodson clutching his legs and striving to pull him down, when a clear, strong voice rang like a clarion note through the white blur of the combat:

"For shame, boys,—for shame! What sort of a fight is this? Six of you against one! Take that, you young rascal! And that! And that!" And a stalwart figure sprang to Con's side and began to hurl mighty snowballs against his antagonists. "You forget I was captain of the team at St. Anselm's not so many years ago. Stop now,—stop! Why, you've hurt this chap in earnest! Stop, I say!"

And Con reeling back dizzily against the rock, felt a strong arm thrown around him, heard a voice speaking in strange tones of kindness in his dulled ear.

"'Tain't nothing," he murmured. "Jest—jest knocked out a bit. There was a stone in that ar last ball."

"A stone?" The clear voice spoke out sternly now, as Con sank down on the ground and began, in primitive "first aid to the injured," to rub his dizzy head with snow. "I would like to know the boy that put it there,—that played such

a mean, cowardly trick. But I won't ask," continued the speaker, with fine scorn. "I won't tempt any of you to lie to me."

Then Pat Murphy spoke up like a man:

"I won't lie to you, Father Phil: it was me. He cut my nose with an ice ball first. He started the fight,—didn't he, boys? There ain't no wuss fighter in all Misty Mountain than Buzzard Con. They're all fighters and thieves and jail birds up there at the Roost. Old Bill is dodging the sheriff now. Con started this fight hisself,—didn't he, boys?"

"Sure,—for sure!" arose the affirming chorus. "He hit right out before we teched him at all."

The clear eyes of his new friend looked down on the accused boy, who was rousing into remembrance now at the tingling touch of the snow. There was a pity and compassion in the questioning gaze, which Con answered simply:

"They were coming to break my traps."

"We warn't,—we warn't! He's lying to you, Father!" was the indignant shout. "We didn't know nothing about his traps. We were coming up, like you told us, to get Christmas greens for the altar."

"And a fine way this is to deck the altar of God!" said Father Phil, in stern rebuke. "A fine way to keep Christmas, the blessed time of peace and good-will,—fighting, wrangling, flinging cruel, hard, angry words that hurt worse than blows! I came here so gladly to say a Christmas Mass for you—my first mission Mass. There was no church, I knew; for I had been a boy here myself. But there was the old log cabin that had been our holiday camp in my school-days; and I felt that, with a lot of you sturdy chaps to help me, we could fix it up. We would bring Our Lord all we had to give,—the light of the Christmas candles to brighten the winter night, the green of the Christmas wreath that we would seek even in the winter snow. But, above all, we would bring warm, young hearts that the cold, cruel, wintry world had not yet chilled. And I find you mocking, fighting, stoning, without any pity or mercy or love! You may go home, all of you!" Father Phil waved his hand in dismissal. "I will take no Christmas greens from you to-day."

"O Father, please, please!" went up a pleading chorus. "Just look what fine ones are growing up there!"

Father Phil glanced at the cliff to which the boys pointed, its steep, jagged sides curtained with a hardy growth of rich green vine, laden with scarlet berries that glowed like drops of blood in the winter's snow. Here, indeed, was fair decking for his simple Christmas shrine. For a moment he hesitated; then a second glance at the perilous height confirmed his judgment.

"No," he said decidedly. "They grow, as it seems fitting to-day, too high for you to reach. I can't allow you to risk the climb. Go home and think of what I have said. I hope to find you all better boys this evening."

The boys turned away, abashed, for there was a soldier note in the speaker's voice that commanded obedience. Father Phil paused a moment before he followed them for a friendly word to Con.

"Is your head all right now, my boy? That stone was a scurvy trick."

"It don't hurt now," answered Con, philosophically. "I'll give it back to 'em some day. But—you all have skeered off everything: no critter will come nigh my traps to-day. And—and—"

Con stopped abruptly: it was not

according to his code to "squeal" at such trifles as hunger or cold.

"You were counting on your traps for a Christmas dinner," said Father Phil, with quick understanding.

"Don't know nothing 'bout Christmas," answered Con; "but 'twas for a dinner sure."

"That's too bad!" said this new friend kindly; "and as long as I set the boys on this track I ought to pay for your loss. Farmer Johnson, I hear, has some fine fat turkeys to sell for a dollar. Go buy one."

"No," said Con, shaking his head as Father Phil held out a crisp bill. "He wouldn't sell no turkey to me. He'd think I stole the money. I'll set my traps farther up the rocks and catch something maybe before night. But I say, Mister" (the blue eyes were lifted in a look that went straight to Father Phil's heart), "if you want them greens and berries up thar, I'll get 'em fur you."

"Oh, no, no, my boy!" was the quick reply. "It's too steep and slippery a climb."

"Lord!" laughed Con. "That ain't no climb! I've hung out over Clopper's Cliff

where it goes down most too fur to see. I've clumb up Eagle Rock where thar ain't twig or brier to hold. I've crossed Injun Creek with one jump. I ain't skeery 'bout a little climb like that over thar. What do you want them ar greens and berries fur, anyhow, Mister?" Again the blue eyes looked up in a question that this young shepherd of the Lord, travelling far afield in his Master's service, could not resist.

"I'll tell you," he said, reckless of the flying hours of this busy day. And, seating himself on the ledge of rock beside Con, Father Phil told his young listener the sweet story of Christmas, in brief, simple words that even the young outlaw of Misty Mountain could understand.

"Now you know," said Father Phil, after he had talked for half an hour.

"Yes," answered Con, drawing a long breath; for the coming of the Holy Babe to the stable, the manger, the watching shepherds, the singing in the midnight skies had held him mute, in rapt attention. "I—I never heard no talk like that before. Mother Moll, she's told me about spells and witches, and how the ha'rs from a black cat will give you luck, but nothing

nice like that. I guess some of them ar shepherds was as rough and ragged as me."

"I'm sure they were," agreed Father Phil.

"I would like to have been there," said Con. "But I wouldn't have got in. You see, Uncle Bill and all our folks at the Roost are a bad lot. Nobody ever lets me in nowhar 'count of them."

"My poor boy!" Father Phil had risen, for a glance at his watch had told him he could linger no longer. "Come down to the log cabin and I will let you in."

"Will you, Mister?" There was a new light in Con's blue eyes as Father Phil grasped his sturdy young hand, regardless of its grime. "And kin I bring you down some greens and berries?"

"Yes," answered Con's new friend, feeling this was the best way to secure this wild mountain sheep. "Only don't break your neck getting them, my boy."

"Ain't no fear of that!" laughed Con, as Father Phil nodded a friendly good-bye. "I'll come."

II.—THE MANSE.

FATHER PHIL quickened his steps as he strode down the mountain. He would be late for dinner at Uncle Gregory's now; and with Uncle Gregory dinner was a serious consideration, that must not be trifled with even by his sister's son, Father Philip Doane. What madness had beset Phil to become a priest, the old gentleman could not understand,—when he might have been a doctor or a lawyer or even a soldier like Uncle Gregory himself. Still, it was done now—the Doanes all had a queer streak in them,—and the old captain believed in sticking to one's colors, be they black or white. Father Phil, in his early boyhood, had been a prime favorite with this old bachelor uncle and Aunt Aline; and now, after a dozen years or so of study at home and abroad, had been welcomed back warmly, though a little doubtfully. For neither Uncle Gregory nor Aunt Aline

was a Catholic; the Faith had come from the Doane side of the house. Father Phil's mother had died a happy convert when her little girl was born, and his father a few years ago.

"You may do as you please, Gregory," Aunt Aline had said tearfully when discussing their nephew; "but I couldn't give up Susie's boy if he turned into a turbaned Turk." So Father Phil, who had been ordained only last spring, had been invited to the "Manse" (as the big old house beneath the mountain was called) for Christmas; and, there being no church within reach, had taken up the log cabin for mission purposes, as we have seen. There was a little mining village some ten miles distant, where a travelling missionary said Mass once or twice a year in a "Hall" rented for the occasion by some of his flock. But the Hall had been pre-empted for Christmas festivities this year, and so Father Phil's log cabin was the centre of interest to all the faithful for twenty-five miles around. He had been busy for two days now. Aunt Aline had lent him the willing services of old Uncle Jerry, who, though a hard-shell Baptist himself, was ready to do anything for young Mas'r

Phil; and the news of his coming—for Phil Doane was a pleasant memory around Misty Mountain—had spread far and near.

There was to be a Midnight Mass, which was something of a departure from precedent; and he had hoped to make his mountain shrine a very Christmas bower; for usually winter came gently to Misty Mountain, and often the green growth in its sheltered hollows garlanded the rocks and cliffs until spring. But he and his boys had been out this morning with scant results. He felt his log cabin would be as bare as the stable of old for the coming of the King. He must get back to it as soon as he could; there was much to be done yet, and confessions would keep him indefinitely in the evening. So he hurried on towards the wide old house that nestled under the shelter of the mountain, its broad lands stretching far down the valley where the Gregorys had lived and ruled for more than a hundred years. Indeed Father Phil's great-great-grandfather had held the log cabin against the Indians when Misty Mountain bounded a wilderness that only the boldest of white men dared invade. And Uncle Gregory

who had fought on the border himself in the later Indian wars, though seventy years old now, was still a sturdy scion of his sturdy race. "Old Hot Scotch" he had been called in his soldier days, and "Hot Scotch" he was still. There was a frown on his grizzled brow when his nephew appeared in the wide Hall to-day.

"Twenty minutes late!" he said, looking up at the great grandfather's clock that never lost a second. "And a fine roast goose overdone! I thought they drilled better in that old Church of yours, young man, and made you march on time."

"They do," was the good-humored answer. "But I'm out of rule and rank just now, Uncle Gregory. I'm sorry I've kept you waiting, and I'll do fitting penance by not touching your goose to-day."

"Tut, tut, tut!" said the old gentleman, testily. "You'll do nothing of the kind. I picked out that goose for you myself this morning, and had it stuffed by a recipe of my own. You may talk about Christmas turkeys, but a roast goose with apple-sauce is a dish for a king."

"I am sure of it," was the hearty answer. "But, not being a king, only a young soldier in the ranks, I must keep to orders."

It's fasting rations for me to-day, Uncle Gregory,—bean soup or red herrings, or anything that doesn't travel on legs or wings."

"Nonsense, sir,—arrant nonsense!" said Uncle Greg, angrily.

"But orders, sir,—orders!" laughed Father Phil. "I belong to an army and must march to the word of command. It is light rations for Christmas Eve. That's been down in our tactics before—well, long before the Star-Spangled Banner began to wave, Uncle Greg. But just you wait until to-morrow! I'll tackle that big gobbler swinging in Aunt Aline's pantry now, in a way that will astonish you."

"Do as you fool please, sir," began the old gentleman irately—and then suddenly paused as the great Hall door flung open again and a little fur-clad figure burst upon the threatening scene.

"Brother Phil—Uncle Greg!" And a pair of small arms somehow contrived a simultaneous embrace of both figures.

"Susie!" cried Father Phil in amazement.

"God bless me! Little Sue!" gasped Uncle Greg, with a clearing brow.

"Where, how—what does this mean?" asked Susie's brother.

"Scarlet fever," explained the little lady, nodding a very fluffy golden head. "Scarlet fever broke out at St. Joseph's, and all the girls had to go home; and I didn't have any home but St. Joseph's, so Mother Benedicta said I had better come up here. Lil Grayson's father—they live at Greenville—brought me in with Lil and dropped me at the gate. I hope you don't mind, Uncle Greg." And a pair of long-lashed grey eyes were lifted in a roguish appeal which the grimmest of old soldiers could not resist.

"Mind! You little witch, *mind!* You know well we'd have stolen you out of that jail of a convent if we could long ago," said the old man, heartily. "Scarlet fever! God bless me, my old Colonel lost three boys in one week with it. The nuns did right to pack you off instanter. Drop your coat and hat right here, and come in to Aunt Aline and dinner."

And then Aunt Aline, a nice, plump, rosy old lady, came bustling out to clasp the pretty little newcomer, and declared she was growing into the very picture of her dear dead mother. And all went in to dinner, where the roast goose was flanked by a boiled fish with oyster sauce, and

followed by apple dumplings; for there was an Irish Nora in the kitchen who knew all that was due "his reverence" on Christmas Eve. And, though Uncle Greg glowered a little at the "Popish fare," Susie's gay chirp and Father Phil's laugh made such music at his table that he forgave fish and oysters to-day.

"If I had only known you were coming, my little lass, we would have had a Christmas indeed. It's a dull time you'll be having up at Misty Mountain."

"Oh, no, no, Uncle Greg!" said Susie, gleefully, as, jumping up from the chair beside him, she put her arms about the old man's neck, and laid her soft cheek against his. "It's going to be a lovely Christmas with Brother Phil and you and dear Aunt Aline, and this nice, warm, old homey house all snuggled up in the snow. I never was in a dear old home like this at Christmas before, only in summer time. And Midnight Mass in the log cabin! Mother Benedicta said that would be so perfectly beautiful,—just like the first Christmas night of all. O Brother Phil, may I help fix the altar? Sister Mary Margaret always lets me help at St. Joseph's. I can trim candles fine. Next

year she will let me fill the vases with flowers. She says I might as well learn, as I'm going to be a nun myself."

"You're going to be *what?*" thundered Uncle Greg, in a voice that would have appalled any one but little Sue.

"A nun"—she cooed her soft little cheek against his,—“a nice little nun like Sister Mary Margaret herself."

"You're not!" roared Uncle Greg, thumping the table with his clenched fist.

"A nun! Thunderation! I'll see that you are not, if I have to carry you off and lock you up from the whole black-gowned crew. A nun indeed!—what sort of condemned nonsense are you putting in the child's head, Phil Doane, before she has fairly cut her teeth?"

"I didn't put it there," laughed Father Phil; "did I, Susie?"

"I'm not so sure of that," growled the old man, still unappeased. "When a chap like you, with the whole world in a sling, drops all his chances and turns priest, I am prepared for anything,—anything, sir.—But don't let me hear any talk about your turning nun, little girl; for that's more than I can stand. And another thing," added Uncle Greg, rising from the

table in no very good humor: "about this midnight church business, who is going to keep order?"

"Order!" repeated Father Phil in some surprise.

"Yes, order, sir,—order," said the old gentleman testily. "We had a camp meeting at Indian Creek last summer that ended in a free fight and a job for the sheriff. We've got a hard lot of chaps skulking about Misty Mountain these last few years. There's an old scoundrel and half a dozen or so young scoundrels—Buzzard Bill they call him and his gang,—dodging the liquor law and every other law, I guess, far up there in the Mists. Regular Will-o'-the-Wisps that we can't lay hands on. We've raided their den half a dozen times, only to find a gibbering, toothless old woman and her grandson, a sturdy young rascal that either can't or won't talk. But I'll get them yet!" said Uncle Greg, grimly. "I'll get that old Buzzard Bill behind bars before many weeks are over, if I have to go up after him myself."

"I think I saw the grandson only a few hours ago," said Father Phil. "He was setting traps up in the mountain,—a

handsome little fellow, who looks as if he had been made for better things than seem to have fallen to his lot. 'Con' I think the boys, who were, I am sorry to say, badgering him cruelly, called him."

"Aye that's the chap!" declared Uncle Greg. "And a grand young rascal he is. There's not a hen-roost or a corn-bin safe from him. Fights like a game cock, too. Bound straight for the hangman, as everyone can see."

"Is any one trying to stop him on the way?" asked Father Phil quietly.

"No one, sir,—no one. It's not a bit of use," answered Uncle Greg. "You might as well try your hand on a South Sea Islander."

"That has been done and most effectively, as our old Church has proved, Uncle Greg. I had a little talk with Con myself this morning, and I feel sure something can be done with him."

"Aye, aye!" answered Uncle Greg. "He could be locked up in the Reform, and that's where he will go if I have anything to say about it. They're a hard lot up there in the Roost. And you'll do well to look out for them to-night, or they may be down upon you for a bit of

a Christmas lark, if nothing worse."

Father Phil pondered over his uncle's warning as a little later he took his way along the rough path that led up to the log cabin. It would be wise perhaps to be on guard, for the old soldier knew the ways of Misty Mountain. It was a boundary between two States, whose differing laws could be well evaded on its cloud-veiled steep. There had been no such trouble in his younger days when the only dangerous denizens of the Misty peaks had been snakes and wild-cats; but changes had come of late years that had made lawless traffic and smuggling across the border line profitable. And the boy—the boy in that outlaw den on the Roost, the boy whose blue eyes had looked into his with such appeal this morning—Mountain Con, whom nobody would "let in,"—the thought of him stirred the young priest's heart to its warm depths. Con should not go on his way to the hangman while Philip Doane could help and save.

And Father Phil, who was close to his log cabin chapel now, was startled out of his reveries by the indignant tones of good old Tim Slevin, whom he had left in charge. "Git out of this, ye thafe of the

wurruld!" Tim was shouting. "Git off, I say! I'll not have the likes of ye and yer dhirty baste around this holy place."

"Touch my dog if you dare, you twist-nosed Irisher!" came a fierce young voice in reply. "If I give Dick the word, he'll tear you into bits. The mister up on the mountain told me to come,—he told me to bring these 'ere berries and greens."

And, hastily turning the bend of the mountain path, Father Phil faced the disputant, honest Tim holding the doorway of his mountain chapel; while before it stood Con and a huge wolf-hound, both loaded down with scarlet-berried Christmas greens.

III.—THE LOG CABIN.

FATHER PHIL had come upon the scene none too soon: boy and dog were in a dangerous mood for honest Tim. Con's eyes were blazing, and Dick growling ominously in his young master's hold.

"The boy is right,—quite right, Tim," Father Phil said, laying a friendly hand on Con's shoulder. "I did tell him to come and bring me greens for our Christmas altar. And, oh, how beautiful they are, Con! And how much you have brought!"

"I had to load up Dick, too," replied Con. "Couldn't kerry nothing wuth bringing myself. Been clar up to Eagle Rock, and down to Injun Creek and Snake Hollow. They was growing thick and fine thar. Skeered up a wild-cat, though, that made a jump for me."

"A wild-cat!" echoed Father Phil, in dismay.

"Oh, he didn't hurt me!" went on Con,

cheerfully. "I dodged, and Dick did fur him. Dick can do up any wild-cat that was ever made. Where shall we drop these here greens, Mister? The Irisher won't let us in."

And again Father Phil was conscious of the warm stir in his heart as he looked at the boy and dog,—Con's yellow locks and ragged cap framed in verdant leaf and vine that he bore on back and shoulders; while the huge, tawny Dick was skilfully saddled with a burden of living green; brute and boy alike ignorant of whom they were serving,—to whose divine feet they were bringing their Christmas offering gathered on ways of pain and peril from which His happier children would shrink.

And then a sudden resolve came to Father Phil.

"Unload your dog and send him home (of course he knows the way), and you my boy stay here and help me."

"Help you, Mister!" echoed Con.

"Yes: you have brought me more greens than Tim (who has a lame leg) or I can handle. I want a strong, active fellow that can climb and lift and put them in place. I'll show you how to do it. But first have you had your dinner?"

"Yes," answered Con. "Dick brought in a pair of rabbits this morning. Mother Moll had them cooked when I got home, so I didn't have to wait fur traps. I'd like to stay and help you, Mister, sure." And there was a light of interest in the blue eyes, that told Father Phil his morning talk with Con had not been in vain. "I'll unload Dick, fur he ain't safe ter fool with." (Dick's master cast a flashing look at Tim Slevin.) "And I'll send him home and stay here with you."

"Arrah, Father dear," remonstrated Tim, while Con was busy disposing of Dick and his burden. "D'ye know what sort of a young rascalion this boy is ye're taking in?"

"One of those Our Lord came on earth on Christmas night to save, Tim," was the answer.

"Av course, yer riverence,—av course!" assented Tim, reluctantly. "But it's an out-and-out young divil Mountain Con is, as everybody knows. I'm thinking there will be quare talk if he is seen about here, Father; fur he is as like to fire the place as not. And there's them that say (God between us and harrum!) that old Mother Moll is a witch outright and

has taught the lad more than a natural boy should know. Did ye hear him tell about the wild-cat? There isn't another craythur on the mountain that would dare go where he ~~has been~~ this day."

"Poor boy!" said Father Phil, pityingly,—“poor, bold, fearless, friendless Con! I am surprised at you, Tim. I thought you were a better Catholic, not to say a better Christian, than to listen to these ridiculous stories about witches and spells. There is sore need of instruction on Misty Mountain, as I can plainly see. Poor Con is no little devil, but a child of God as much as you or I. He has brought his Christmas offering to the altar; and he shall help us to place it there, let the gossips say what they will.”

Tim accepted the rebuke with due submission; for his “riverence,” though young, was “knowledgeable” beyond Misty Mountain’s wisdom, as all the dwellers round about who had heard of his studies and travels agreed.

So Con was let in, and a strong and sturdy helper he proved. Perhaps it was because he had lived so close to Nature, and knew her ways and means, that he arranged his Christmas greens about walls

and windows with an artistic touch that startled Father Phil. The log cabin was but a rough shelter for its Christmas King,—the rude walls unplanned and unplastered, the pointed roof-trees still wearing their rugged bark. Mountain Con would have been at a loss among fluted pillars and frescoed walls, but here he was at home. He knew how Mother Nature curtained and veiled and draped rough nooks like this; and he proceeded to imitate her, flinging trailing greenery here, massing feathery cedars there, lighting up the dark places with the glow of the scarlet berries, while he climbed and swung upon roof and rafter; as Tim Slevin, watching him breathlessly, declared again no "natural boy" would or could.

At last it was done, and the rustic sanctuary was a bower of living green. With a flying leap from the pointed roof where he had adjusted his last pennant of glossy crowfoot, Con landed at Father Phil's feet.

"Fine!" said the young priest, warmly. "You have made our little chapel beautiful, Con. There's not another boy on the mountain could have done so well."

"I guess they couldn't," said Con,

surveying his work with satisfaction. "You see they hev'n't watched how green things grow. That ar table ought to hev summat on it, too," he added, glancing at the impromptu altar, that, though arched and bowered with green, was as yet bare of all its furnishings. "It ought to hev moss on it like a rock. I kin get yer some, if you want it, Mister."

"No: thank you all the same, Con, moss won't do," said Father Phil, gently. "A good woman and my little sister will fix the altar. Here they are coming now!"

"Kin I stay and watch them?" asked the boy, eagerly.

"Certainly," answered Father Phil. "Stay as long as you please. And I would like to have you here to-night, too. Can you come?"

"Dunno," said Con, his face clouding. "If all them other boys are here, there'll be a fight sure."

"Oh, no, no! I promise you there will not," was the quick answer,— "not on Christmas night, Con. The boys will all be good, I'm sure."

"I ain't a-trusting them," said Con, shaking his yellow head; "and I ain't trusting myself nuther. I don't stand fur

no monkey jabbering, and I ain't forgot that stone in the snowball to-day. Wouldn't want to stir up no trouble for you, Mister; so I best keep away. I'll jest set here, if you don't mind, and watch how they're going to fix this table, and thin I'll go."

"All right, then!" said Father Phil, who had a busy afternoon and evening before him; for there were confessions to hear in the little shack without. "I'm sorry, Con. Let me give you a little Christmas present for all your trouble."

He took out his pocketbook, but the boy's cheek flamed with sudden red.

"No, Mister," he said, "I don't want no money! I wouldn't a-got all them 'ere greens fur *money*: I got 'em 'cause you was nice and kind, and stood by me agin all them boys up thar; and talked to me like I was real folks, and not jest Mountain Con. I wouldn't like you to spile all that by paying me *money*, Mister."

"I won't, then," answered Father Phil, as, almost ashamed of his offer, he replaced his pocketbook. "I'll only say thank you, my boy, and God bless you for what you have done! And if you would like to have another talk, I'll come up to the mountain

to-morrow afternoon. Be at the hollow where we met to-day about four o'clock, and we'll talk again."

"Will you?" said Con, his face brightening wonderfully. "I'll be there, Mister, sure!"

Then Father Phil was gone; and Con, watching, half hidden under his towering greens, could hear his cheery greeting to the newcomers outside.

"Nora, Kathie, Susie—why, this is great! Linens, laces, candlesticks! Good gracious! Aunt Aline must have opened her store closets, indeed!"

"Sure she has, your riverence," answered Nora's rich Irish tones. "It was Miss Susie here that did it. She wouldn't stand for the plain tablecloths and the plated candlesticks you bade me bring. She said there was nothing too good for the holy altar,—which is God's truth, as we all know. And so Miss Susie went crying to her aunt, and said that the poor things I had wouldn't do at all, at all—"

"And they wouldn't, brother Phil," broke in a little voice that was like the twitter of a snow bird in Con's ear,—
"not when Aunt Aline has a whole closet of beautiful things she is keeping for me.

I just told her what a Midnight Mass was, and how nothing could be too grand or great for it; and how the convent chapel looked,—all shining with gold and silver. And Aunt Aline cried because I talked so much like my dear dead mamma, and said she couldn't refuse Susie's children anything, and I could do just as I pleased."

"Good!" laughed Father Phil. "It is easily seen who is going to be mistress of the Manse this Christmas. Even the white hyacinths that dear Aunt Aline has been coaxing into winter bloom—"

"I didn't ask for them," interrupted Susie, softly. "Aunt Aline offered them herself to remember mamma, brother Phil. Oh, we'll have a lovely Christmas altar,—as lovely as even Sister Mary Margaret's that I helped to fix before I came away!"

"Go ahead, then, little girl, and do your convent best!" said Father Phil.

And then Con fairly held his breath in surprise at the group that came in sight,—Nora and Kathie, Aunt Aline's strong-armed Irish maids, laden with household treasures: Persian rugs, embroidered linen, silver candlesticks; while behind

them, her hands filled with white hyacinths was the loveliest little figure that Con had ever seen. She was wrapped and capped in soft brown furs, like the friendly little creatures of the rocks and ridges; but the fair, sweet face, half veiled in fluffy golden hair, was something that neither mountain nor cliff nor valley, nor even the stars and the moon, which were the wonders of Con's world, could show. Con had no great liking for little girls in general. They called him names and made faces at him, and wore ugly little hoods and were not nice at all. In fact he often fired a couple of soft snowballs, to express his disapproval of them as they passed. But this—*this*—must be one of the fairies that figured remotely in Mother Moll's stories of witches and spells. Watching under his greens, Con stared breathlessly as she stepped forward into the log cabin, and then stood transfixed with delight.

"O Nora, Nora, how lovely it is,—how perfectly lovely! Look at all those beautiful vines and berries! I never saw such a lovely Christmas sanctuary before. It is prettier even than St. Joseph's. The greens reach to the very tiptop of the

roof. How could brother Phil put them up there?"

"Sure he didn't, Miss," answered old Tim, who stood much impressed by this new arrival. "No mortal man could. It was that b'y beyant, that can climb like a cat."

And then the fairy vision turned and faced Con,—faced him with a radiant light in her eyes, a radiant smile on her lips.

"Oh, how did you do it?" she asked. "How did you make this old rough place so beautiful, just like it was summer time again, and everything was growing fresh and green? Oh, you nice, good boy, to make our Christmas chapel look like this!"

"I—I ain't no nice, good boy, Missy," was the blurted answer. "I'm—I'm jest Mountain Con. The Mister that is bossing here said he wanted some vines and greens and things, and I—I got 'em for him, and twisted 'em up whar he told me. It do look pretty, fur sure"—Con surveyed his work with honest approval,—“most as pretty as Misty Mountain hollows in the spring. And thar ain't no rattlers to strike you here. You hev to look out for rattlers when the mountain hollows get green as this.”

"Snakes you mean," said Susie, her soft eyes widening.

"Yes," answered Con,— "wust kind. Me and Dick killed one last summer with six rattles. I got 'em home now."

"Goodness!" gasped Miss Susie, in breathless interest. "Who is Dick? Your brother?"

"No: he's heap better than a brother. Dick's my dog."

"Oh!" And little convent Susie experienced another shock. "A dog can't be better than a brother!"

"Dunno," answered Con. "Ain't got no brothers or sisters, so I can't tell."

"But you've got a mother and father," said Susie, in soft-voiced sympathy.

"Naw!" replied Con, shaking his yellow head. "Ain't got nothing or nobody except Uncle Bill and Mother Moll; and they—they jest tuk me in."

"Miss Susie," Nora broke in anxiously upon this interesting conversation. "We'll be fixing the altar now, as your brother wants. Arrah, darlint," Nora sank her voice to a whisper as Susie reached her side, "don't ye be noticing the likes of him! It's one of thim Buzzards from the

Roost above he is, and not fit to look into yer pretty face."

"O Nora, but see how beautifully he fixed everything for brother Phil! He likes him, I am sure; and I—I don't care if he is a Buzzard, I like him, too."

"Whisht now, — whisht!" reproved Nora. "Your brother is a holy priest and must like as the Lord wills. But ye're a little lady, Miss, and must keep to yer own. Come now! We'll be fixing the altar wid all the fine things we've brought for the Holy Mass to-night; for the days are short, and we haven't too much time."

And the little sacristan of St. Joseph's was soon so busy with her beautiful work that the wild boy of the mountain was for the moment forgotten.

IV.—MAKING FRIENDS

MEANTIME Con watched the completion of his work with breathless interest. The Persian rug, with its rich-glowing hues, was spread on the earthen floor before the impromptu altar; richly embroidered linen, and lace delicate as the frostwork on the rocks, covered the rude boards; the tall silver candlesticks with their waxen tapers were arranged on each side; Venetian vases were filled with white hyacinths; and all this strange splendor was increased by the two great candelabra brought down by Jerry a little later,—old-fashioned candelabra, glittering with pendant prisms like the icicles that hung on the Misty Mountain pines. Never had Con seen such glories before; and he stared spellbound, feeling with a thrill of delight that his greens and berries fitly framed these wonders. And while he still watched with kindling eyes for what was coming next, little

Susie, stepping back (as Sister Mary Margaret always did) to get a full view of taper and vase, found herself again at his side.

"Gosh, but you made it fine!" exclaimed Con, unable to restrain his admiration. "Are you going to light all them candles to-night?"

"Oh, yes," said Susie,— "every one!"

"And set all them shining things to sparkling?" went on Con, eagerly. "Golly, I'd like to see them!"

"Oh, but you will, of course!" said Susie. "You'll come to Mass. Everybody has to come to Mass on Christmas night. It would be a great sin to stay away. But maybe" (a sudden harrowing assailed Susie),—"maybe you're not a Catholic."

"I ain't," answered Con. "Dunno what that is."

"And—and—you've never been to church or Mass—or—or anything?" gasped Susie.

"Nowhar," said Con. "Did think of starting to school this winter, but teacher said she was full up,—jest didn't want to let me in."

Speech failed Susie for a moment. Never had she faced such dizzy depths of igno-

rance before. What—oh, *what* would Mother Benedicta, what would Sister Mary Margaret, what would any of the dear nuns at St. Joseph's say or do here. Then suddenly little convent Susie seemed to see and know.

"O you poor boy!" she said softly. "Isn't there anybody to take care of you?"

"Don't want nobody," declared Con. "I'm twelve years old now. Mother Moll says I can take keer of myself. There ain't much use in schooling nohow."

"Oh, but there is—there *is*!" said Susie, eagerly. "You want to learn things. And church!—to think you have never been to church! Oh, you must come to-night! It will be beautiful! And you fixed all these lovely greens yourself."

"Miss Susie dear,—Miss Susie!" called Nora. "We're going home now."

"Yes, yes! I'm coming, Nora,—I'm coming!" The little convent missionary paused for a last breathless word.—"The candles will all be lighted, and everything will be so perfectly beautiful!"

"Miss Susie, what was it I tould ye, darlint?"

"Yes, yes! I'm coming, Nora,—right now!"

And the lovely little girl was gone, leaving Con with his rough young heart strangely softened. For she, too, had talked to him as if he were "real folks," and not Buzzard's Con.

"She said I was to come and see things, and he said so too. Golly, I've a mind to do it, if it wasn't for them boys a-hooting and a-jeering. I wouldn't like to get up a fight in all these fine fixings. I ain't forgot that stone in the snowball. I'm a going to have it out with that ar Tom Murphy sure. If I could snoop around somewhar the boys wouldn't see me, and watch them candles lighted to-night."

Con was slowly taking his way along the mountain path while he thus considered his situation. Suddenly he paused, his quick hunter's eye catching sight of a furry little thing beside the road. He made a stride forward and picked up, no wild, hurt, wood creature as he expected, but a small silk-lined muff,—the muff that he had noted encasing the pretty little girl's hands when she first dawned upon his astonished eyes an hour ago. Con stared at his find curiously. It was so dainty and soft and silky, with a cord and tassel to swing on its owner's arm; and peeping

out was an embroidered little handkerchief that smelt of violets—and—and—Con's touch shook out something else: a small purse silver-meshed and silver-clasped, and filled with shining silver coins.

"Golly, what a lot of money!" More dimes and quarters and half dollars than Mountain Con's rough hand had ever held before. It would make him rich for a year. It would buy—what *wouldn't* it buy at Reddy Jones' across the mountain where nobody asked questions and Mother Moll dealt for sugar and flour and tea! Reddy had a pair of skates for a dollar that Con had been eyeing hopelessly for months. How he could clip down Injun Creek, frozen hard from shore to shore, on those skates! And Reddy had jackknives too,—jackknives with four good blades that would cut fine. Con wanted a jackknife more than anything on earth; his had only one rusty blade that simply hacked.

My, but there was a lot of money in that little purse; and he had found it all by himself, and nobody—nobody would ever know. He could just kite up to the Roost with it, like Dick did when he found a bone—but—but the faint breath of the violets drew Con's attention to the dainty

white handkerchief. The little girl, the pretty little girl who had talked to him as if he were "real folks,"—all these things were hers. Maybe she was crying about them now. Any girl would cry at losing such treasures as these. And she had looked at him so kind and nice, and talked so soft and sweet, just like the birds twitter; and—and he wouldn't have that pretty little girl cry (Con drew a long breath of renunciation) not for all the skates and jackknives in the world. He would take the fur and the handkerchief and the purse and the money and everything back to her right off. But where would he find her? Con paused now, as he framed his good resolve, to wonder where she had gone, this pretty little lady who was so unlike all her Misty Mountain kind. And while he stood thinking and wondering, he caught the sound of voices and footsteps.

"Ah, the illegant muff and the purse with three good dollars in it! Och, was it in the chapel ye left it, Miss, or where?"

"Oh, I don't know, Nora,—I don't know!" came a quavering little voice in reply. "You see, we never carry muffs at St. Joseph's, and I forgot it."

"Sure I know, darlint,—I know! It's meself that should have kept me eyes on it. What I'm fearing is that boy—that bad Buzzard ye was talking to, Miss—arrah, dear" (Nora's voice rose to a shrill cry of triumph), "there's the villyun wid it in his hand now,—ye thief of the wurruld!" And the speaker sprang forward in righteous indignation to wrest his seeming pelf from Con's hand. "Give it to me, ye spalpeen,—give it to me!"

"Let go!" cried Con, repelling Nora's grasp. "Let go, I say! I ain't going to give it to you at all. I'm a-giving it to *her*." And he put the muff and its contents into Susie's hand. "Jest picked it up in the road here."

"It's lying ye are, ye villyun!" broke in Nora, indignantly. "Ye found it in the chapel beyant; and were making way wid it when we come upon ye. Sure don't we all know what ye are?—Count yer money, darlint,—count yer money afore he gits off wid it!"

"I haven't teched the money!" blurted out Con.

"Oh, I'm sure you haven't!" said Susie, eagerly.

"Count yer money while I hould on to

him, Miss!" repeated Nora, catching Con by the arm.

Con loosened her hold with a jerk that made her sturdy figure reel; and then, leaping back against a rock, he stood with both fists clinched, prepared for further defence.

"Oh, please, please don't do like this!" cried Susie, piteously. "He didn't touch my money, I know, Nora. And I did drop my muff in the road, for it is all white with snow.—Oh, I'm sorry I made all this trouble for you!" And she turned her tear-filled eyes on the defiant Con, softening him at once.

"I was going to take it all back without hurting a thing." And the rough young voice had a tremor in it. "I was just standing here thinking where to go."

"Oh, I know you were!" said Susie. "Thank you so much for finding it! The muff was a Christmas gift from brother Phil, and I wouldn't have lost it for the world; and Aunt Aline sent me the pretty purse on my birthday. I would have cried my eyes out if I hadn't got it back. I'd—I'd like to give you something for bringing them to me," concluded Susie, hesitatingly.

"A quarter, then, Miss," put in the still suspicious Nora,—*"a quarter if ye must; though I'm not believing yet that he's not lying to ye."*

"Don't want no quarter!" blazed out Con. *"Don't want no pay at all!"*

"Oh, I didn't mean pay!" said Susie, her grey eyes opening wide. *"I meant a picture or a book, or something like people give me. I've got a lovely Christmas picture in my trunk; Mother Benedicta gave it to me yesterday. It is the shepherds watching their flocks on Christmas night. It's a beautiful picture,"* continued the little speaker. *"The stars are shining, and the little lambs cuddled up asleep at the shepherds' feet, and the angels singing in the sky telling them Our Lord was born—"*

"And a-lying in the stable," interrupted Con; *"in the manger where they fed things; and the shepherds were rough and ragged like me. I know about it all. I'd like to have that picture first rate."*

"Come to the Manse, then, to-morrow," began Susie.

"And he better not," broke in Nora,—*"not unless he wants to be took up. The Masther has his eyes on the whole Buzzard*

brood. It's in jail they all ought to be, young and old."

"O Nora, Nora, you're just too mean for anything!" twittered Susie in soft reproach.

"Let her gab!" said Con, fiercely. "Who keers for her? Who keers for the Manse or its master? Let him try to jail Uncle Bill! Jest let him try! The boys will smoke him out of that ar fine house of his mighty quick."

"Ye hear him, Miss,—ye hear him?" said Nora. "Is it to a young haythen divil like that ye'd be giving book or money? Come on, darlint,—come on; for yer aunt is watching and worrying for us now. Come home quick!" And, catching Susie's little hand, Nora drew her firmly away.

Con stood looking after them with glowering eyes. He had learned to give back rough words as well as blows; but as he watched the little fur-clad figure disappearing in the distance, his eyes gradually softened.

"I oughtn't to have said that," he muttered. "I oughtn't to have skeered her by no such talk. I'd like to take it back. I'd like to tell her I wouldn't let no smoke or fire come near that house

while she's in it. I'd rather burn up myself. I guess I'm done for now. She won't ever talk nice to me agin."

And Con took his gloomy way up the mountain, feeling as if he had lost something he could never find. It was a hard, rough way; for Con went by the shortest cut, up sharp steeps, through thickets and briar bush, over ridge and rock and chasm where a misstep would have been death. Not even the "Boys," wild and reckless as they were, dared to "cut" over Misty Mountain like twelve-year-old Con. Swift-footed though he was, it was full half an hour before he reached the jagged ledge of the mountain he called home. The "Roost" jutted out like a shelf from the pathless height that rose above it, and looked down on equally pathless depths below. A heavy growth of mountain pine fringed its edge and added to its forbidding gloom.

Behind the pines, and half built against the towering cliff, stood a long, low cabin, or "lean-to," rudely constructed of logs and bark, and underpinned with rocks and stones that gave it a look of grim, defiant strength befitting the outlaws' den it was. Rumor whispered of passages and hiding places, hollowed in the cliff

behind, where the "Buzzards" carried on lawless work and stored ill-gotten goods safe from approach or discovery. At the old smoky cabin, Mother Moll, toothless and half-witted sometimes, Con, skinning his rabbits or setting his traps, were the only residents visible when investigators called.

It was to this "home," like the den or cave of the wild beasts of the mountain, that Con was now making his hurried way.

V.—AN OUTLAWED NIGHT

CON scrambled up the rocks through the pines, where Dick, who had reached him by ways of his own an hour ago, sprang out to meet him, barking delighted welcome. In a moment the low door of the cabin swung open, and Mother Moll, bent and shaking, stood on the threshold, lifting a skinny finger in warning. Con was used to Mother Moll's warning, and paused, with a silencing grip on Dick's jaw.

"He is home," wheezed the old woman in a hoarse whisper,—"home, and drunk and mad as the deuce can make him!"

"Uncle Bill?" gasped Con.

"Aye!" panted the old woman, nodding her grizzled head. "Nat is took; they've got him in the Pineville jail. It was old Gregory that put them on his track." Poor Mother Moll's voice quavered. "It will be twenty years for him maybe, and he not nineteen. Eh! Eh! And Dan and

Wally daren't show their faces this side of the mountain. It's the old man at the Manse has done it all. He's sworn to clear out the Buzzards from Misty Mountain, if it takes every cent he's got. Aye, aye, but it's awful to hear Bill talk! Nat in for twenty years, and only nineteen! He'll be even with them that put him there, Bill says, if he has to swing for it himself."

Mother Moll had stepped out under the pines to convey all this lurid information. Con received it without a shock. He had lived among these fears and perils ever since he could remember clearly. True, there had been a dim distant time that seemed different; but it had become very shadowy. Sometimes the mists lifted in his dreams; but in his waking hours he was only the young outlaw of Misty Mountain—Buzzards' Con.

"Where is he now?" asked Con.

"Asleep," answered Mother Moll. "He's drunk himself asleep. But it won't last. You'd best keep out of his way; for he was raving about you with the rest."

"About me?" said Con, a little startled.

"Aye, aye!" was the answer. "He's

took it in his head that you've turned agin him—agin us all."

"Turned agin you?" repeated Con in bewilderment. "Where could I turn?"

"That's what I told him," said Mother Moll. "You hedn't nobody or no place to turn. But the devil is in him to-day about Nat, and you'd best keep out of his way. You might go off to Reddy Jones'. There will be a turkey raffle there to-night, and I've got ten cents here." She felt in her bosom and drew out an old buckskin purse.

Con knew what Reddy Jones' would be,—the drinking, the eating, the gaming, the fighting. Last night the turkey raffle might have appealed to him; but what Mother Moll would perhaps have called a "spell" had fallen upon him to-day,—a gentle spell, that he felt Reddy Jones' would break. The talk with the "Mister" on the mountain, the log cabin bowered in berries and green, the glittering glories of the Christmas altar; more than all, the soft-eyed, friendly little girl who had believed, trusted, defended him, had opened a strange new world to Mountain Con,—a world which he had never in his boyish memory known. If he must keep out of Uncle Bill's way (and that there was wis-

dom in Mother Moll's warning Con from hard experience knew), he would go back, and from some safe shelter, which his boyish enemies could not penetrate, watch all the wonderful glitter and sparkle and glory of the log cabin to-night. He knew a place—his keen eye had noted it as he passed this afternoon—where, hidden by a clump of dwarf pines, he could look through one of the low windows, and see all. But it would be just as well not to enlighten Mother Moll, in whose old withered heart there was still a spark of woman's feeling for the friendless boy.

"I'll go, then," he said evasively. "Give me some cold corn-cake for supper, Mother Moll, and I'll keep out of Uncle Bill's way. Mebbe he'll be off in the morning."

"I dunno," said the old woman, hopelessly. Forty years of married life with Uncle Bill had left her doubtful of his moods. "I'll get ye the corn-cake and some cold bacon. Ye can stay in Reddy's barn for the night." She turned back into the house, and came out again with Con's supper wrapped in a piece of paper. "He's stirring," she whispered. "Be off!"

And, without waiting for further trouble, Con bounded away lightly as the hunted

wild thing he was. He took the longer road this time; for the sun was near its setting, and soon the shadows would gather over rock and ridge,—shadows that would make the short cut perilous even to Mountain Con. Otherwise he had no fear of darkness or night. It was a clear wintry evening, and just now the snowy heights around him were a glory of crimson and gold. Peak after peak caught the sunset radiance and flung it back from glittering summits, while the ice-clad pines sparkled and shimmered with rainbow light. As Con sat down on a jutting rock to eat his supper, he looked about him with a new consciousness of the beauty of the scene. He had helped to make beauty for the first time to-day, and it had roused some dormant sense in him.

“Don’t want no candles or shining things, nor berries and greens up here,” he thought. “It’s pretty enough without them. But I’ll surely like to see all them ar fine fixings to-night.”

And, his supper finished, Con kept on his way down the wild steeps, darkening now in the swift-gathering winter twilight, until he reached his outpost. It was a hollow under the rocks where perhaps

fuel or ammunition had been stored when great-grandfather Gregory held the log cabin against the Indians; but it was choked up now with a thick growth of dwarf pines, through which Con and Dick had wiggled their way last week in search of an escaping woodchuck. The same pines had for years screened one of the narrow windows of the log cabin so effectively that the opening was scarcely noticed. But Con's quick eye had seen its possibilities while he debated on a "snooping" place to-day; and he now hurried into its shadows, feeling that by breaking away a few boughs he would have a new view.

There was nothing going on yet. Father Phil was busy in the little shack outside, hearing confessions. A few penitents were kneeling in the deepening shadows. Con recognized among them one or two of his morning enemies; and he felt that if there was to be peace at this strange gathering, it behooved him to keep out of sight and reach; for poor Con knew nothing of the blessedness that comes with Christmas Night. So he fell back cautiously into his shelter and flung himself down in the hollow under the rocks. It

was warm and dry, and carpeted with pine needles; and the wild young wanderer, who was a tired boy after his exciting day, soon dropped off to sleep. Perhaps it was the thought of the soft-voiced little girl, or the "Mister" on the mountain that had talked so nice to him, that brought pleasant dreams to Con to-night,—the old pleasant dreams, that were growing more and more misty with the passing years,—dreams in which neither Uncle Bill nor Mother Moll nor any of the wild crew at Buzzard Roost had place.

He was by a fire (there had always been a bright blazing fire in these old dreams); and there were windows hung with cobwebby stuff; and some one was holding him warm and safe in soft white arms. Who it was he did not know; he was always too sleepy to see. He could only hear low, sweet singing, that kept him happy and still—gee! Con's eyes opened wide in bewilderment. Why—why he was hearing that singing now! He started up, half awake. Where was he? What had happened? It was night,—late night. He could see through the feathery trees the glory of winter stars above him. He could hear—hear the singing almost at

his side. He stood for a moment breathless and wondering, as the shepherds of old when that same Christmas *Gloria* burst upon their ears. Then his quick eye caught the golden light flickering into his shelter; and, parting the pine boughs, he looked in on the Midnight Mass.

The little cabin chapel was crowded to its limit. Three of the boys that had come upon Con this morning were kneeling in the front row of worshippers; while Tommy Randall and Pat Murphy were in white surplices, reverently serving Mass. And—and—could that be the "Mister" of this morning,—the shining figure standing there under the bowering greens, before the radiant altar? For a moment Con thought it must be one of the angels he had heard about, singing in the Christmas skies. And there, too, was the little lady of the Manse, and his late enemy Nora, kneeling with clasped hands and uplifted eyes; while all around and above them gleamed the glory of the lighted candles, rose the music of the hymns.

What all this wondrous beauty and splendor meant poor Con did not understand. All he knew was that it had something to do with the Babe that lay in the

manger, at whose coming the angels had sung; and, like one of the shepherds of old, his rude, untaught soul felt a strange awakening thrill. There came a sudden hush in the music. Every knee was bent, every head was bowed; and outside in the pine shadows wild Con of the mountain knelt and bowed in unconscious worship, too. But even in this blessed moment he could not escape his luckless lot.

"I saw ye, ye villyun!" muttered a hoarse voice in his ear; and Dennis, head groom of the Manse stable, laid a stern hand on his shoulder. "I saw ye a-peering in at the window,—aye, and I heard what ye said to Nora Malone the last evening! The masther tould me I was to come and keep me eyes open for divilment. It's no harrum I'd bring to man or baste this blessed night, but I'll not have ye hiding around this holy place. What ye are here for I'll not ax; but it's for no good, I'm sure. So be off wid yerself, and let me hear out the holy Mass in peace."

"I ain't doing no harm," muttered Con.

"Whisht now,—whisht! It's no time for talking," warned Dennis, sternly. "Off wid ye, I say! And ye may thank the Lord I am in His grace to-night, or it would be

the worse for ye. It's for naither you nor me to make trouble at this holy time."

For a moment Con stood fierce, sullen, defiant at this rough dismissal—then it was no time to make trouble, he felt, with a new sense of reverence for the wonders around him; and he turned away from his hiding-place, and went out into the starry glory of the Christmas night.

"Faix, and it's well I was on the watch," declared Dennis as, Mass over, he guided his sweetheart Nora and her little lady back over the moonlit path to the Manse. "That young villyun of a Buzzard Con was hiding in the bushes behind the chapel. I caught a glimpse of his yellow head in the half-shut window."

"The Lord save us!" gasped Nora. "It's ye that have the quick eye and the wise head, Dennis, even in yer prayers."

"I had me ordhers," answered Dennis, "Sez the masther to me afore we set out for the Mass: 'Keep yer eyes and ears open, Dennis, for thim rascals on the Roost. I'm thinking they may be up to some divilment to-night.'—'It will be a distraction in me prayers, sir,' sez I; 'but I must do my duty to you, sir.'—'Aye,' sez the masther, slipping a Christmas dol-

lar into me hand; 'as the Good Book sez, we must both watch and pray.' And well it was that I did; for that young villyun was there for no good, I am sure—"

"Oh, he *was* there for good!" broke in Susie, eagerly. "I told him to come, Dennis,—I told him to come and see the altar and hear the Christmas Mass. And you drove him away! Oh, poor boy, poor boy! Everybody is so mean to him,—poor Mountain Con! He has no father or mother; no one to teach him, to help him, to be kind to him, not even on Christmas night,—poor, poor Con!" And the sweet voice quavered into something very much like a sob.

"Sure and it's not crying ye are, darlint?" remonstrated Nora. "Crying over that wild rapsallion, Buzzard Con! What does the likes of him know about holy altar or holy Mass? It was some divil work he was afther when Dennis spied him. We may thank the Lord the roof wasn't fired over our heads, as the young villyun threatened us the past day. It's nervous ye are wid all the excitement and the long watching to-night, or ye'd never be fretting over a rapsallion like Mountain Con. Come now! We'll be hurrying back home,

so ye can get into bed and go to sleep."

And Nora hurried her little lady into the old house, whose lights could be seen glittering brightly through the leafless trees; while, far up on the mountain, the homeless boy for whom Susie grieved lay under a sheltering rock, his blue eyes fixed on the Christmas stars, thinking of all he had seen to-night.

"It was fine," murmured Con to himself dreamily, for sleep was stealing upon him,—“finer than that ar sunset on Eagle Peak this evening. I'd like to have seen them angels the Mister talked about before—before that big Irisher druv me away."

VI.—“PALS”

SUSIE slept late next morning; both Aunt Aline and Nora took care of that. When she awoke, the winter sun was winking a “Merry Christmas” greeting through her window; a bright wood fire blazing in her old-fashioned chimney; and hanging to her big “four-poster” was a Christmas stocking filled with all the pretty things that could be procured at short notice for the unexpected little guest, —a lovely pearl breast-pin, a slender neck chain, a small sandal-wood fan, two or three cobwebby handkerchiefs, and an Irish lace collar. Aunt Aline had ransacked her treasure boxes, and Uncle Gregory had topped things off with a golden half-eagle in a small birch-wood box that he had made himself. It was a very happy little girl that danced down the wide stairs to hug the dear ones waiting for her, and to breakfast on hot cakes and maple syrup,

and other delicacies unknown to the long tables of St. Joseph, with their chattering crowds.

Everybody else had finished long ago; and Uncle Gregory was standing with his back to the roaring Christmas fire, in high good humor at the news that he was retailing triumphantly to Father Phil.

"We've got one of the scoundrels,—got him tight and fast behind the bars of Pineville jail. Fought like a tiger, Bronson tells me; but they brought him down. I'll clear that whole den of thieves out before many weeks, if I have to go after them myself."

"O brother dear, no, no!" remonstrated Aunt Aline. "At your age it would be madness, brother."

"I don't care a darn what it may be, Madam!" blustered Uncle Gregory, fiercely. "Here I am a State official and justice of the peace, having the laws broken every day at my very gates; letting a gang of scoundrels terrorize the mountain under my very nose, Madam! It's enough to make me the laughing-stock of the country. It has gone beyond bearing and belief. Why, Dennis tells me that beggar brat of a boy from the Roost was

down about here yesterday, boasting that the Buzzards could smoke me out of house and home! I, Captain Eben Gregory, out of house and home, Madam! And they *could* do it, too; there's nothing easier to such scoundrels. I tell you I'd rather have a band of naked Indians whooping on my tracks. As for that boy Con or Don, or whatever they call him, I've given all my men orders to seize and hold him on sight. I'll have no monkeying with any such young fire bug. He goes to the reform school or something rougher at once."

The knife and fork had dropped from Susie's little hand; the hot cakes and maple syrup lost all their flavor. When Uncle Gregory talked like that there was no use answering, as even brother Phil knew. But as the old soldier, having thus freed his mind, stalked out of the room to give his orders for the day, and Aunt Aline hurried away to look after the big turkey for dinner, Susie slipped out of her chair and stood trembling at brother Phil's side.

"What! You're not done with your Christmas breakfast already?" he said. And then, turning a startled glance on the pale little face, he added: "Susie! Why, you are ill, darling!"

"Oh, no, brother Phil,—no, not ill, only—only sorry and frightened for poor, poor—oh, poor Con, brother Phil! Oh, can't you help him, hide him, be good to him, for—for my sake, dear, dear brother Phil?" And Susie sank on her knees, and, burying her face in the big cushioned arm of her brother's chair, burst into a flood of tears.

"There, there!" said brother Phil, gently smoothing her golden curls. "My poor little girl, don't cry! It's your first peep at the hard ways of a hard world, Susie."

"Everybody is so mean to him," sobbed Susie,—*"Nora and Dennis and Uncle Greg, and everybody! Oh, I didn't think good people could be so mean to a poor boy!"*

"Another hard lesson to learn, Susie. Good people can not always hear and see," answered her brother.

"Oh, no, they can't,—they can't," said Susie, indignation drying her tears. "Nora thought Con was stealing my money; and Dennis, that he was going to burn the chapel; and Uncle Greg thinks he is the worst boy in the world. But you and I know better. Can't we do something for poor Con, brother Phil?"

"That is what I have been wondering all night, Susie,—ever since I saw the look

on his young face as he stared in the chapel window,—as, I think, the shepherds must have looked when they strayed in out of the darkness two thousand years ago. We must do something for poor Con. What shall it be, Susie?”

“Get him away, brother Phil,—get him away somewhere from Uncle Greg and Dennis and all those bad Buzzards in the Roost, and make him a real nice, good boy.”

“I’ll!—I’ll think of it, Susie. Only don’t ever tell, or Uncle Greg will be ready to lock us all up.”

And, feeling it was well not to burden his little sister’s heart and head with any further planning, Father Phil said no more, but, a little later, took his lonely way up the mountain, “thinking” very seriously indeed about the friendless young outlaw against whom every voice and hand seemed raised. The priest knew his uncle too well to attempt appeal or remonstrance there. The old soldier had taken his stand against the boy, and would keep it, though the heavens fell. And after the wild, free life of Misty Mountain, the stern discipline of the reform school would drive the reckless Con to sullen defiance or desperate revolt.

As Father Phil recalled the look in the blue eyes lifted at his face yesterday, the tone in the young voice refusing pay for his work; as he thought of the wondering awe on the boyish face peering last night into the Holy of Holies, the purpose grew upon him to help, to guide this young out-cast,—to save Con, soul and body, at any cost. Pondering over ways and means, Father Phil kept on up the rugged steeps, whose icy strength seemed softening into gentler mood to-day.

Misty Mountain was given to these vagaries. It was seldom, indeed that old Winter held its heights so grimly as he had done this passing year. Usually his was a friendly reign, with the little stream-lets trickling under the light ice crust, the snow only a soft warm mantle to keep the mountain mosses green, and Spring playing hide-and-seek with Jack Frost under the wreathing mists.

And Con was at the meeting place waiting for Father Phil, as he had promised,—rather a chilled and hungry Con; for he had been out on the mountain all night, and there had been only a scant crust of his corn-cake left for breakfast. He had supplemented it by some roots

that he had learned were good to chew when provisions were scarce. Though Father Phil had not foreseen quite so dire a situation, he had guessed that a little Christmas cheer would be welcome, and his pockets were full,—ginger cookies and seedcakes, a big red apple and two oranges, nuts, raisins, and a small but wonderful box of bonbons that Susie had presented to him as a Christmas gift the day before,—truly French bonbons, she assured him, made by Sister Melanie of sugar cane sent from her Louisiana home, and filled with Southern pecans.

Never before had Con seen, much less tasted, such good things; and when Father Phil spread his Christmas feast on a flat rock and told him to "pitch in," he did it with a zest that stirred his new friend's compassionate heart. Oranges, apples, cakes, vanished without ceremony; nuts and raisins followed,—Con cracking the shells in his strong white teeth deftly as a mountain squirrel. But when it came to the bonbons, in their pretty, painted, lace-lined box, he hesitated.

"Them ain't to eat?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Father Phil. "And they are fine. Try one."

Con took up the sugary morsel doubtfully. Each bonbon was in its little cap of fluted paper, as Sister Melanie's French traditions taught such confections should be. The careful combination was strangely suspicious to Con's mountain eyes.

"They don't look like—like eats," he said. "Mother Moll, she told me never to touch nothing I didn't know. I nigh kilt myself eating bird berries once. Had fits all night, and was bent double till Mother Moll straightened me up with turpentine tea."

"No fear of fits in these," observed Father Phil, reassuringly. "See, I'll take one myself."

Con followed suit, and doubted no longer.

"Gee, but they are good," he said,—
"good and pretty! If you don't mind, Mister, I'd like to take a couple of them things to show Mother Moll."

"Take them all," said Father Phil.
"They are yours, to do as you please with, my boy."

"Mine?" said Con, breathlessly. "Mine, Mister? You don't mean box and all?"

"Box and all," replied the priest, smiling.

For a moment Con was reduced to amazed silence. He took the pretty box in

his hand and turned it round and round.

"Golly!" he said at last, lifting shining eyes to Father Phil's face. "Whatever makes you so good and nice to me, Mister? I'm a-going to show this box and all these pretty things in it to Mother Moll, and tell her how good and nice you are. She don't believe nobody can be good and nice unless they are working you and tricking you for suthing. But you—you ain't working and tricking me, I know."

"My poor boy, no!" was the pitying answer. "I wouldn't work you or trick you for the world. I want to be your friend, Con,—your real friend. Do you know what 'friend' means?"

Con thought for a moment, for the word was not in the Buzzard vocabulary.

"Suthing like a 'pal,' ain't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Father Phil, nodding. "It's a 'pal,' Con,—the best kind of a pal: one that never goes back on you, that stands up for you through thick and thin—"

"And fights for you," put in Con, with a sparkle in his eye.

"Yes, if necessary fights for you," answered Father Phil,—“or, what is better, gets you out of the fight, Con.”

"You can't do that," said Con, shaking his head. "When a fellow is in a fight he has to stand up to it."

"Not always," replied Father Phil. "Sometimes there are stones in the snow balls, Con, and you are knocked out."

"You can get up and fight again," said Con. "I'll have it out with Pat Murphy for that yet."

"No, you won't; for I've talked to Pat, and he is ready to say that it was a scaly trick, and he is sorry for it. And now I want to talk to you as I talked to him. You're having tough luck up here on Misty Mountain, Con. How would you like to cut away from it all, little pal, and go off with me?"

"Off with you?" echoed Con, staring. "Go off with you, Mister? Where?"

"To school," answered Father Phil. "You would like to go to school; wouldn't you, Con? You'd like to learn to read and write and count?"

"I can do it a little," said Con. "Nat was a-learning me before they tuk him. He learned me to write C-o-n. There ought to been something else, he said, but he didn't know it. Nuther did I. We asked Uncle Bill, and he cussed and said

he didn't know nuthing neither; so thar it had to stay—C-o-n. That ain't no sort of name to write for school, Mister."

"We might find you another," said Father Phil, smiling. "And school would be a fine place, Con: not a shut-up little room, like that in the valley; but a big, wide house, with trees and grass around it, and plenty of room to run and jump and play ball. And you would have a nice white little bed all your own, and warm clothes to wear, and all that you could eat and drink. But, better than all these, you would learn beautiful things, Con,—things like those I told you yesterday about the good God in heaven, and the little Babe who was born on Christmas night and laid in the manger, and the angels who sang in the midnight skies. And you would read books that tell all about this wonderful world we live in, and the sun and the stars and the moon; how the rivers run and the mists gather and the snow falls. And you would grow up not Mountain Con, fishing and hunting and trapping and fighting, but a wise, good, great man—"

"Like—like you, Mister?" asked Con, softly.

"Oh, much better than I, I hope, Con!" was the cheery answer.

"Nobody couldn't be no better," said Con. "I don't believe nobody could be so good. Jing, when I looked through the window last night and seen you standing thar all white and shining, I thought you couldn't be sure enough,—that I must be asleep and dreaming dreams. And—and—" (Con drew a long breath) "if—if—you'll take me, Mister, I'll go,—I'll go wherever you say."

VII.—A PERILOUS ATTEMPT

FATHER PHIL was startled at the eager response. He had not expected that Con, used to the wild freedom of Misty Mountain, could be lured so easily into unknown ways where that freedom would be lost.

"I'd like to go, for sure," Con went on, with brightening eyes. "I'd like to get off the Roost, whar there's only cussing and fighting. I'd like to get away from the boys, before they get me jailed or hanged. I'd like to get away from Uncle Bill,—that is the worst of all."

"How?" asked Father Phil, who was beginning to hesitate at the thought of "Uncle Bill" and his perhaps lawful authority. "Does he treat you badly, my boy?"

"Yes," answered Con,—"cusses me, licks me, treats me worser than he treats Dick. I'd like to get away from Uncle Bill, sure."

"Is he your real uncle?" asked Father Phil, realizing there might be difficulties in the way that he had not foreseen.

"Dunno," said Con,—*"dunno what he is, 'cept that Nat and Dan and Wally are his real boys, and I ain't."* The blue eyes looked puzzled for a moment. *"Seems to me as if I had somebody else once, but I can't remember where or when. It has always been Uncle Bill. He warn't so bad to me long ago. Used to keep me and Mother Moll at a place where there was cows and chickens and growing things. It warn't so bad there; but since we came to Misty Mountain he has been mean to me, sure. Keeps a-growling and a-cussing and a-wishing he had never seen my face."*

"Then he won't object to your going away with me," was the cheerful answer.

"Dunno," said Con. *"Ain't going to ask him 'bout it. I'll jest kite off with you, Mister, where and when you say."*

"I wish you could." Father Phil found it hard to be as wise and prudent as the occasion demanded, with Con's blue eyes lifted in such boyish trust to his face. *"But—but—if Uncle Bill is your relative and natural guardian, I am afraid we shall*

have to ask him, Con. Suppose you take me up to see him?"

"To the Roost?" gasped Con. "You ain't—ain't thinking of going up thar, Mister. Uncle Bill is that drunken mad jest now he'd—he'd shoot you on sight."

And, from what he had heard of the Roost and its denizens, Father Phil felt that perhaps Con was not far wrong.

"Then—then, suppose when Uncle Bill gets sober you talk to him yourself? Tell him you've got a chance to go away from Misty Mountain and make a man of yourself; that I will put you to school, clothe you, board you, and give you an honest start in life. Can Uncle Bill read and write, Con?"

"Kin sort of scratch," answered Con, doubtfully.

"Well, then I'll put it all down in writing," said Father Phil, taking out a tablet and fountain pen from his pocket. He wrote for a moment in large, clear characters. "Give this to Uncle Bill; and if he agrees to let you go with me, let him put his name or mark to it, and then all will be right. He will have you off his hands forever. And you—you will be my little pal—nay, better than that,

Con, my little brother for good and all."

Con looked at the paper wistfully.

"You couldn't take me off without—without this here, Master?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't, Con," was the reluctant answer. "It might make trouble for both of us."

"Don't keer about trouble for me, but I surely don't want to bring trouble on you, Mister, not fur nothing. So I'll show this 'ere paper to Uncle Bill when he sobers up. If he wants to get shook of me, here's his chance. Mebbe he'll fix it up all right." \

"I think he will," said Father Phil, who knew how fiercely Uncle Greg was pressing the old outlaw, and felt that the Roost would soon be "cleared out," and Con well off his doubtful guardian's hands. "I'll be here again to-morrow to learn what you have to tell me. It will be good news for us both, I know. Till then good-bye, my boy,—good-bye, and God bless you!"

And Father Phil laid his hand on Con's yellow head in a benediction that the boy never forgot—and then was gone, like a ray of sunshine threading the mists that were rising above the melting snow. For

it was the last poor Con was to see of his good "pal" for many a long, hard day. But just now his young heart was stirring with the glad, new hope awakened by Father Phil's words.

To go away with him,—with this strong, kind man who was so good, so wise, so wonderful! Con thought of the shining figure he had seen at the altar last night, and felt that it must have power beyond mortal ken. To go away from the wild steep of Misty Mountain, from the smoky old cabin in the Roost; from the cursing and fighting and drinking of Uncle Bill and the boys; from the dark, wicked ways in which they walked, and from which untaught, untrained Con had always instinctively recoiled! To go into a world where the men were like "Mister," and women perhaps sweet and soft-spoken as the little lady with the muff; where he would have a soft bed and good clothes like the boys that hooted and jeered at him, and things to eat such as the Mister had brought him to-day! To go to school,—a school where they would let him in and teach him all those wonderful things of which Father Phil had spoken, where he would be this kind Mister's

pal—nay, what was it he said at the last? His little brother for good and all. His brother! Something seemed to choke Con at this strange, sweet word; he felt almost as if it made him cry.

It was such a dazzling, bewildering, outlook that opened before Con that he had to sit down when he reached Eagle Nest and think it all out. Even Misty Mountain seemed to grow soft and sweet and kind to-day. The sun was out bright and warm; there was a trickle of running water under the melting snow; and as he sat there thinking, he could hear the snap and crack of the breaking ice. Injun Creek was tugging at its winter fetters, and would soon be leaping in foaming freedom down the mountain.

"A-busting loose like me," laughed Con to himself, as he nibbled at one of Sister Melanie's bonbons. "I'll be sort of sorry to leave old Mother Moll; but I ain't no good to her here. Mebbe sometime sometime, when I learn all them things the Mister talks about, I kin come back and bring her something better than these 'ere sugar nuts. I'd like to bring her something real good, sure,—a bonnet with feathers on it mebbe, like Mrs. Murphy's;

and a long coat edged with fur, and shoes that wouldn't hurt her poor feet. Yes, when I learn things like the Mister says, I ain't going to forget Mother Moll, sure. Jing! I never counted on having luck like this,—never! I thought I was in to folly along with Nat and Dan, and might get jailed or hanged. I'd better step along, though, and give Uncle Bill this 'ere paper before he cuts off somewhar down the mountain agin. I wonder what he'll say to it?" Con surveyed the folded note curiously. "Jest cuss me, I guess, and let me go, glad to get rid of me; fur I rile him worse every year, why I dunno."

And, still further cheered by these reflections, Con kept on his way over the heights, that he had to tread more cautiously to-day; for old Winter's reign was broken and his frozen ways insecure. The snowdrifts were slipping; now and then a great slide would thunder down the rocks, covering Con with feathery flakes; the white mists wreathed and curled in the hollows; the ice sheaths of the pines were dripping off in soft murmurs; Injun Creek was making ready to leap the frozen falls. Con had to mind his steps to-day; so it was sometime before he took

the final scramble through thicket and rift that landed him at the Roost, where Uncle Bill, in the mood that comes "the day after," was seated at the cabin door, sunning himself in the spring-like beams.

Uncle Bill was not a very pleasant figure at his best: just now he was at his worst: a huge, hulking, hairy old giant, grizzly in brow and beard; with a red scar, gained in an early encounter, marking one side of his face; and fierce, fiery eyes, reddened by much drinking, gleaming angrily in their sunken sockets. The one soft spot in his hard old heart had been reached by the arrest yesterday; for Nat was his favorite son, and the old man was still stinging and smarting under the hurt. It was a bad time to open communications of any kind with Uncle Bill; but this Con in his glad hopes for the future did not know.

"Back are you?" growled the old man, as Con appeared. "It's about time, you durned young loafer, you! Whar have you been?"

"Down to Piney Hollow and Wolf's Gap and everywhar," answered Con, who was in too happy humor to notice that there was a blacker cloud on

Uncle Bill's always frowning brow.

"Filling your hungry maw with all the beggar pickings you can get," said Uncle Bill, casting a fierce look at the pretty box in Con's hand. "What's that you have there?"

"Candy," answered Con, cheerfully,—
"the finest candy you ever tasted. Try one, Uncle Bill."

"No sugar stuff for me!" growled the old man, whose palate had been burned out by fiercer flavoring. "Who gave it to you?"

"A man," answered Con,—
"the nicest man I ever saw. I got him some greens and berries yesterday to fix up that ar old log cabin on the Ridge for Christmas."

"To fix up what?" asked Uncle Bill, his sunken eyes beginning to gleam.

"That log cabin down to Piney Ridge," continued Con, feeling he was arousing Uncle Bill into unusual interest. "Golly, we had it fixed up fine,—all green and woody-like, with candles and all sorts of shiny things, and the people a-flocking from near and far. You never seen such a grand show, Uncle Bill."

"And—and—they let you in? What sort of game is this you're playing on me, you young dog, you? Turning agin me,

are you,—turning agin them that fed you and warmed you and keered for you, a-mating with the cursed scoundrels that is hunting down me and mine?"

"Oh, no, Uncle Bill, I was not turning against you at all! I was just snooping in the window at the grand show, and an Irisher came along and druv me off."

"Druv you off!" repeated Uncle Bill, fiercely. "And that's what I or'ter have done long ago. What I'm keeping you around fur, you ungrateful whelp, I don't know! What good are you to me, that I don't kick you out, to scramble for yourself, like the stray young cur you are?"

A spark flamed into Con's blue eyes at the words,—a spark that told of some strange, new spirit awakened in the boyish breast, to which Uncle Bill was blind.

"Don't want no kick to start me," was the answer. "I'm ready to go right now. That Mister I got the greens and berries fur yesterday says he'll take me off, and school me and keer fur me and make a man of me. He writ it all down on paper fur you to read, and say the word that I could go."

And Con held out the paper to Uncle Bill, who snatched it from him with a

fierce, shaking hand, and stared at the clear writing with blinking, bewildered gaze. Father Phil's courteous communication ran as follows:

MY DEAR SIR:—I have taken a great liking to your boy Con. I will be glad to give him a better start in life than he can ever get at Misty Mountain. If you will permit him to go with me, I promise to send him to a good school, and provide him with all that he needs until he is able to support himself. All I ask of you is to sign this paper, giving your consent, as his present guardian, to my future care of him.

PHILIP J. DOANE.

Uncle Bill read the missive slowly. Reading was not very much in his line. Clear as was its meaning (for Father Phil worded it carefully), it took some time for the friendly offer to penetrate the old man's dull, befogged brain. At last he understood, or thought he did; and he stared at the boy before him, with sunken eyes that kindled, as he gazed, into brutal fire.

"And—and—" For the moment the maddened old sinner could not find words for his fury. "You dare bring me this—

this—after all I've done! Ye'd bring the hellhounds down on me, you—you—" Uncle Bill burst into a torrent of profanity terrible to hear; and, starting up to his full giant height, he caught Con in a grip that all his boyish strength could not resist. "I've a mind to kill you for it, you whelp,—to *kill* you!"

VIII.—BROKEN BONDS

THE world seemed to swing around in a dizzy whirl before Con's eyes, as Uncle Bill struck at him with his huge, hairy fist and felled him to the ground at his feet.

"I'll larn you," he panted, and he caught up the heavy stick that he used for mountain climbing and began to belabor the boy without mercy,—“I'll larn you how to turn on me, you young whelp! Yes, I'll larn you how to bite the hand that feeds you! Take that—and that—and that!” And, fairly foaming with rage, the old man rained down the pitiless blows until the shrieking, struggling boy was stricken into a merciful semi-consciousness, through which he dully caught poor Mother Moll's pleading cry:

“Stop!—stop! Ye're killing the boy,—ye're killing him, Bill Gryce! Stop, I tell ye, ye old fool, ye! They'll come look-

ing for the boy from ye yet, and I'll tell all,—I'll tell all! Stop! O Lord in heaven, I believe ye've done for the lad now, and what will ye be saying when they ax for him,—what will ye be saying to them, Bill Gryce? O my poor lad! Ye've killed him outright!"

The trembling wail was the last sound that fell on Con's ear; blackness closed around him, and he knew nothing more.

How long this strange darkness lasted Con never knew. When he roused at last, it was to a dull ache in his head, to a sore stiffness in every strong young limb; to a dim, shadowy world in which for a while he seemed to have no place. Through a break somewhere in the gloom around him he could see stars. What was it he had heard about the stars shining pitifully down upon his helpless pain? Con looked up at their tender light, trying to remember. Then a cold nose was pressed to his face, a soft tongue licked his hand. He stretched out his stiff arm and it fell upon Dick,—Dick watching there in the gloom beside him. He drew the dog's head close to his own, and fell asleep again, to wake into full consciousness now. He was lying on his

own pallet of dried moss; the sun was shining through the smoky window above him, and Mother Moll was holding a bowl of something hot and spicy to his lips,—poor old Mother Moll, whose own eye was blackened by a blow, and whose weak hand trembled.

“Drink this, my lad. It will draw the pain and hurt from ye. Eh, eh, but ye’re the bold, strong boy that he couldn’t kill! Drink this, and it will warm yer young heart, and ye can be off before he comes back to murder us again.”

Con emptied the bowl, as she had bade him; and strength seemed to come with the draught,—strength and remembrance.

“Uncle Bill!” he faltered, and a shiver went through the sore young limbs. “Where is he?”

A curse broke from poor old Mother Moll’s withered lips.

“Off again,” she answered,—“off after he had done his worst to ye,—off again somewhere to meet Dan and Wally, and be at some devil’s work, I’m thinking. And listen, lad! Ye must be off, too, before he gets back,—off from this black hole forever.”

Con looked about him dully; for the

light of the blue eyes was sadly dimmed. The hole on which he gazed was black indeed, with a low, smoke-grimed roof a littered floor, a yawning chimney place, in which a few logs flickered cheerlessly. Rifles and powder flasks hung upon the rude walls. A few dried fish, bread, cheese, and a fitch of bacon provisioned the shelf that was Mother Moll's only larder. The light came dimly through two deep-set windows, whose thick glass was cracked, and patched with strips of leather. It was little better than the den of the wild mountain creatures that roved without. But it was the only home that Con knew; and, weak and sore as he was just now, he shrank from the thought of leaving it. For his eye had lost its light, and his young limbs their fleetness; and even his bold young heart had learned the chill of fear.

"Where—where can I go?" he asked.

Mother Moll was quick with her answer.

"To him," she said, putting a slip of paper into Con's hand. (It was Father Phil's message to Uncle Bill, that had produced such dire results.) "Where and what he is I dunno, lad; but he means to befriend ye,—I am sure of that. So ye

must find him by what ways ye can. And listen, lad! There's more that I must tell ye while I dare speak. What and who ye are I can't say, but ye're neither kith nor kin of Uncle Bill or me. He brought ye home to me one night when ye weren't three years old—as fine a babe as I ever saw. There was trouble in yer family, he said; and I was to keep ye till it cleared up, and he was to be paid well for it. He had his pockets full of the money then. I had just lost me own little Bill, and me mother's heart was sore and empty, so I took ye to it, without asking no more. I was to keep ye well; for there were those that might come looking for ye that would pay better still. But they never came, and the money gave out, and old Bill grew sorer and fiercer about ye every year. But I kept the pretty clothes ye had on, and the gold chain and medal ye had round yer neck. It had a clasp on it with the three letters C. O. N. We took that for yer name, though it could not have been, I know. That's all I can tell ye. Whoever ye belong to must have giv ye up long ago, so ye can look for nothing from them. Uncle Bill is now turned agin ye tooth and nail; so ye'd

better go to the man that offered to take ye, let him be where he may."

Go to him! Memory had wakened clearly now. The berries, the greens, the kind Mister of the Mountain, the radiant figure in the midnight glory of the log cabin,—the strong, good friend who had promised to do all things for him, to take him for his "little pal," his "little brother,"—Con remembered all now. Ah, he would go to him indeed. Now that Uncle Bill's cruel blows had broken all bonds to the Roost, he would find, he would follow the Mister of the Mountain, let the way be where it might.

But as yet poor Con was too stiff and sore in every limb to walk; he could only lie there on his moss pallet, letting Mother Moll minister to him in her simple way,—binding his head with cooling cloths, rubbing him with oils and liniments of home manufacture, feeding him with strengthening teas and broths; for the old woman had not reared three stalwart sons to rugged, if reckless, manhood, without learning many things that neither schools nor doctors teach.

In the meantime Father Phil had been once, twice, three times to the hollow

below the rocks looking for Con, all in vain. Either the boy had failed him (which he could not believe) or Con's wild old guardian would not permit him to come. And then a sudden telegram had reached the Manse, summoning Father Phil back to duties which would not brook delay. His little sister would have to remain a few weeks longer, and he gave her his parting charge:

"If you hear or see anything of Con, give him this card, Susie, and tell him to send it to me whenever he is ready to keep our bargain."

"O brother Phil, I will!" was the eager answer. "But—but I'm afraid—I'm afraid—Uncle Greg and—and everybody has scared him away, and we'll never see poor Con again,—never again!"

And Father Phil, taking his hurried way back to scenes of more pressing duty, felt, with a pang of regret for his little Pal, that Susie was perhaps right.

Happily for Con's returning strength, Uncle Bill stayed away for several days,—long enough for Mother Moll's teas and unguents to do their work, and the boy's lithe young frame to recover something of its usual vigor.

"Ye'd best be gone, lad," urged the old woman when the third day was drawing to its close. "What devilment Bill will be after next no one can tell, for old Gregory is hunting him close. Here's two dollars to put in yer pocket, and the bit of paper that neither ye nor I can read. And I've tied up the little clothes and the neck chain in a bundle that ye're to keep buttoned up in yer jacket, though what good it will do ye after all these years I can not say. It's the sore, sad heart I have at letting ye go like this, my poor lad!" And Mother Moll, who had grown so dull to pain and sorrow that her old eyes had been tearless for years, began to cry.

"There!—don't cry, Mother Moll!" said Con, appalled at such unusual weakness; and he put his young arms around her and drew the poor old withered face to his own. "Don't take on like this; for I'm coming back, Mother Moll,—coming back with all sorts of fine things for ye. And I'll carry ye off where there'll be no one to bother ye, Mother Moll; where ye'll have a nice warm fire and cushioned chair, and soft shoes for yer feet, and mebbe a cloak and bonnet like

Mrs. Murphy's. I'm coming back to look out for ye."

"I'll be dead and gone and the worms eating me before that day, lad," sobbed the old woman lugubriously.

"No ye won't," cheered Con. "Thar's lots of grit and go in ye yet, Mother Moll. Jest stand up to things and keep alive, and look out for me; for I won't forget ye, Mother Moll. I couldn't forget ye if I tried."

"Ye won't, I know, my lad,—ye won't. But whether ye'll ever get back to me is more than I can say. It's luck I wish ye, lad,—the luck that ye'd never find here. And now be off, and find the good friend that will take ye away from Misty Mountain and its wild ways forever."

Con kissed the withered old cheek and was off, as she bade. Yet it was with a heavy heart; for Mother Moll had been good to him in her own poor way, and the smoky old den in the Roost was the only home he knew. Whether he would find the kind Mister after all this time he could not tell; but he was still too sore and weak to spring and leap and climb, as was his wont, over the wild ways of Misty Mountain. It was a slow-stepping Con that

wandered down the steeps, where the melting snows had left the jagged rocks sharp and bare. The pines stood green and feathery. Injun Creek was roaring in full flood down the Pass. And everywhere, floating, wreathing, veiling the rocks and ridges and hollows, was the mist, stealing white and still over the mountain like the ghost of the vanishing snow.

Con loved the mist. It meant that the sharpest, hardest cold was over, and that he could wander where he willed without being frozen outright. There had been days and nights of late when he had to crouch with Dick by the smoky cabin fire, so bitter and deadly was the icy air without. But the mist meant that the dull silence of the mountain would soon waken into sound and life; that the birds would flutter back and begin nest-building, and the green things grow. Once the stern grip of Winter was broken in these border lands that the mountain guarded, Spring came on, playing hide-and-seek in the mists, as Con, without any dates or calendars to teach him the seasons, knew.

But to-day, perhaps because he was still weak and sore and dizzy, the white

cloudy veils seemed to bewilder him as they rose and fell, closing over the rough ledge of the Roost, and hiding it from his sight; surging up at his feet as if they would bar his way, opening into sunlight vistas as he went on. He was feeling very lost and lonely and strange, when suddenly there came a swift scurry through the thicket behind him; and, with a glad bark, Dick leaped out of the bushes, springing on his young master in a wild delight that sent them both tumbling over in the melting snow. n

"Dick! Dick!" laughed Con, as boy and dog rolled together in a joyous tussle, "Good old Dick! Come along, then,—Come along, old fellow! You shall 'bust loose,' too."

IX.—THROUGH THE MIST

CON and the dog started off,—Con strong in heart again, now that this faithful friend was at his side. They stopped for a while in the hollow beneath the green-wreathed rocks, but there was no sign of the "Mister" there to-day. The moss where Con had lain on Christmas Eve was dripping wet now, and the melting snows had made a little pool where he had battled with the boys. Everything seemed to have grown soft and warm, even Con's own heart, from which all the fighting spirit had fled. If he could but find the "Mister," and go with him to where people were good and gentle and kind!

So he and Dick kept on their way down the cloud-veiled steeps to the log cabin, which, Con felt after all the splendor of its decorations, the "Mister" must still be holding as his own. But when he

reached the threshold, Con paused in dire dismay. All the glory of the Christmas night had vanished like a dream,—glittering candelabra, gleaming tapers, laces, broideries, rugs. The cabin stood rough and bare and deserted save for one figure—Con's late enemy, Pat Murphy,—busy tearing down the greens and berries, and sweeping them out to burn; Pat Murphy, who had flung the stone in the snowball, and whom Con had sworn to "lick" on sight. The blood boiled and then chilled as suddenly in the young outlaw's veins. He was stiff and sore still: could he dare an encounter with sturdy Pat to-day? He must, though it killed him; and then, as he stood nerving himself for the unequal fight that he felt had to come, Pat looked up and stared at the intruder for a moment doubtfully:

"What are ye doing down here?" he asked.

"Ready to fight you about that 'ere snowball," said Con, clenching a rather shaky fist.

"You needn't," replied Pat. "I gave my word to say I was sorry the first time I saw you. And I'll say more, too. You best skip out of this 'ere place quick as you can.

Captain Gregory's put a price on you."

"A price!" echoed Con.

"Yes," continued Pat,—“twenty dollars to anybody that will bring you up to the Manse. I might try for it myself, but I won't. Father Phil give us all a talking to about you; said we were mean and coward and unchristian. Oh, he give it to us hot and hard! And we promised not to do it no more. And I won't, not even for old Gregory's twenty dollars. But you better skip quick, for all his men are looking out for you now."

"What do they want with me?" asked Con, in bewilderment.

"To shut you up," answered Pat. "Old Greg says it ain't safe to have you loose. He's going to put you in the Reform."

"What's that?" asked Con. "Jail?"

"Wuss," was the uncheering reply,—“a heap wuss. I'd ruther be in jail a dozen times. Old Greg says he is going to put you there. And if you don't skip far and fast, he will."

Con listened in wonder. He had the wariness of the wild creatures and he could not quite understand Pat's sudden change of heart; for the stone in the snowball rankled still. It would be well, he thought,

to keep out of its flinger's way. He longed to ask some questions about the "Mister," but he did not dare to. Pat might trick, mislead him again.

"You'd best make for the Roost and stay there," cautioned this late enemy; "or old Greg will get you sure."

And Con turned and walked off, leaving Pat to clear away the Christmas débris with a sense of duty well done.

Back into the thickening mists went Con, with Dick at his side. All unconsciously, the boy had missed an opportunity he would never regain. A word about Father Phil and his offer would have stirred Pat into eager interest, and he would have guided homeless Con straight to his good friend's side. But this the poor Con of Misty Mountain did not know. Still he resolved to heed Pat's warning: he would skip far and fast out of old Gregory's reach. He could travel, like the hunted fox and deer, by ways the old man could not follow, until he was far beyond his power or rule; and then he could show the paper in his pocket and find its writer without fear.

So Con planned as he took his way up the mountain, where the mists were growing whiter and thicker as the day wore

to its close. The sun was setting, a red ball of fire in the Gap, and Con was very tired. Those two days and nights of pain in the smoky old cabin had taken away much of his fearless, boyish strength. He must find a shelter for the night. But this was no new thing for Con. Misty Mountain, with its hollows and hiding-places, was familiar camping ground, and Mother Moll had filled his ragged pockets with bread and cheese; for Uncle Bill had come home laden with provender, and her larder was no longer empty. He knew of a fine place, not so very far up the mountain, where he could sleep. It was a sort of cave or *cache*, as Uncle Bill's boys called it, where they hid things—kegs and boxes and cans—that they did not want to carry up the steep climb to the Roost; then there was a lot of straw and heavy sacking that would make a warm bed for the night, and Dick would take care that no wild things came in to disturb their sleep. With Dick's keen nose and sharp teeth at his side, Con had no fear of wolf or wild-cat. But there would be worse things than wolves or wild-cats astir on Misty Mountain to-night, though Con did not know this yet.

He felt only that he must lie down some where and rest; for, though his sturdy young frame was cased in muscles that had the spring of steel, they still were strained and sore, and his head was not altogether clear yet. Perhaps that was why the mists rolling up thicker and whiter in the gathering dusk seemed to bewilder Con. It was well that Dick was at his side, or he might have lost his way. Sky and stars were blotted out; even the ground beneath his feet was a white blur. All around him was a cloudland, in which queer, fantastic shapes seemed to start out and vanish as he passed. Rocks, trees, thickets, all the landmarks he knew so well, were veiled and vague and strange to-night. He would be glad to reach the *cache* for which he was instinctively making, and lie down in the warm straw to sleep.

But Con felt, with something of the old spirit rising in his heart, it was good to be free even in this cloudland; good to be away from Uncle Bill forever; good he had met Pat Murphy and been warned of old Gregory's hunt for him; good that he and Dick could go on their wild way, by paths that the old man in the Manse would never reach. Now that the ice had

melted, the fierce grip of the frost broken, he and Dick could wander for days and weeks without fear. They could catch the rabbits and hares scurrying out for greens in the mountain; and there was wood to cook them,—Con knew how to strike fire from sticks and stones. There were roots and mosses quite as good to eat as potatoes and beans. And always there were warm nooks and hollows, carpeted with pine needles, where he could snuggle up close to big, fur-robed Dick, and sleep for the night. Then, when he and Dick were miles and miles away from Uncle Bill and old Gregory; he would go down where there were people and houses, and show the paper in his pocket, and with the two dollars Mother Moll had given him, find the "Mister" who would take him for his little pal and brother as he had said.

And, with this hope cheering him, Con kept on his way through a world of cloudy phantasms that might well have dismayed many an older and wiser traveller, until a sudden sound in the white stillness made him pause abruptly, and clap a silencing hand on Dick's jaw that was just opening for a bark. Dick knew the warning, and was suddenly motionless

as a dog turned into stone. Voices—fierce, hoarse voices—were talking near. Con and Dick were close to the *cache* now, but—but—some one was there before them; some one—nay, two, three speakers were almost within touch. Con, in dire dismay, crouched down behind a clump of bushes that had started out of the blur beside him. He dared not move; for it was Uncle Bill's fierce, husky tone that came through the veiling mists.

"Take plenty of ile, fur this cussed fog is agin us,—plenty of ile and turpentine as well. And start the barns and stable fust: the hay and straw will catch quick."

"Aye, aye!" It was black-browed Wally's voice that answered. "We're on to the job all right, pap! And the fog is not agin us. We'll have things roaring before they catch a glim of light. Dan stole down and cut all the wires at dusk; ye couldn't see an inch beyond yer nose then. We'll smoke the Gregorys out fur good, don't ye fear."

"Aye, we will, will, the—the—" Uncle Bill, hoarse with rage and hate, broke into a burst of profanity terrible to hear. "We'll larn them, my lads; we'll show them that Bill Gryce and his bold boys

are not to be hunted down like wolves and catamounts. We'll show them that we can hit back,—can fight our own. Nat, my brave yellow-haired Nat,—think of him, my lads,—think of your bold brother locked up in the jail for mebbe twenty years, as old Gregory swears. Think of Nat, lads, and do your wurst!"

"We will, pap,—we will, don't ye fear!"

"Plenty of ile, plenty of turpentine," continued the fierce old voice; "and the hay and straw fust. But—but don't ye stop, at that, lads, don't stop until that thar great house of his catches fire good. Don't stop till it's ablaze from roof to ground. Don't stop till everybody in it is choking or burning, or running out yelling and screaming into the night."

"We won't, pap,—we won't," came the fierce promise. "We'll make a blaze that will light Misty Mountain to its tip."

"I'd like well to help ye, lads, but I'm that stiff with the drubbing I gave that young whelp the other day that I can't hardly lift my arm. Lord, but he riled me, plotting and a-planning with them that's a-driving me and mine out of house and home, taking the bread out of our mouths, jailing my brave boy!

I beat till I couldn't beat no more. Whether I killed him or not, I don't know."

"What was the good of killing the boy?" It was Dan who put the question rather gruffly. "Couldn't you jest have kicked him out and let him go?"

"No," answered his father savagely,—
"not after all I've done and risked for him. Keeping that thar boy meant more for me than you all know. But when he turned agin me, he stirred me up sure. Dead or alive, I've done with him now; for we'll all hev to be off from here before the first crack of day. But fust I'm a-going to hev my spite out full and free. I'm going to set right here and watch old Eben Gregory's house burn. I'm a-going to watch it smoke and crackle and blaze from ground to roof, till it lights the country around; and when it tumbles, when he hasn't roof or wall to call his own no more, when he is turned out like he's turned me and mine from home, I'm going to fling my curse on him, and go off from Misty Mountain forever. But I'll be even with old Gregory fust, boys,—we'll be even with old Gregory fust."

"Aye, we will!" said black-browed Wally, who was an echo of his old father.

Nat and Dan had a touch in them of poor Mother Moll. "Jest you set here and watch us, pap! We hev to wait until that Irish Dennis and the rest of 'em get off to sleep before we start work."

"How about the dogs?" asked the old man, suddenly. "They loose them at night."

"I've got sausage for them," said Wally, grimly,—*"sausage that kills fust bite."*

"Fling it to them quick, lad!" warned his father. "There's a wolf hound thar that could tear ye to bits. Hev a shot ready for him, if the sausage don't work. Lie down within now and rest a bit. I'll call ye at ten."

"Better tumble in the shack yerself, pap," said Dan. "This 'ere fog will stiffen yer bones wuss than they are stiffened now."

"No!" growled Uncle Bill. "I've got to keep watch myself. I couldn't sleep nowhar or nohow to-night. I can't never sleep until I see that thar house a-blazing and a-burning as I want. And I feel—I feel sort of as if somebody war going to snatch that spite from me, do what I will. You don't hear nothing a-breathing or a-creeping round here, do ye, Dan?"

"Lord, no, pap," reassured Dan,—*"nothing at all!"*

"I thought I did," said the old man, doubtfully. "I sort of felt like thar was something hiding and listening in the fog."

"Spooks mebbe?" suggested Dan. "Mother always said that the 'hants' walk out in the mists when no one can see."

"Your mother is a fool!" broke out Uncle Bill, fiercely. "She allus was. Thar ain't no such things as spooks. When you're dead, you're dead, and there ain't no more to you. Never believed in no preacher's talk, and never will. But I've been sort of shaky and upset, though, ever since I laid it on so hard to that thar young whelp of a Con. Wonder if I killed him or not? Durned, if I could tell!"

"Mother was sort of sot on him, but I guess he ain't much loss to ye, pap," remarked Dan, philosophically.

"Dunno 'bout that," muttered the old man,—*"dunno 'bout that at all. Now that it's over with, I don't mind telling ye I got a lot of money with that thar boy,—I got five hundred dollars down."*

X.—A YOUNG HERO

"FIVE hundred dollars!" exclaimed Dan and Wally together. "Five hundred dollars fur Con! How, when, whar, pap?"

"I ain't a-telling," growled the old man, with returning caution,—*"I ain't a-telling no more yet. But ye don't think I'd been a-fooling with that thar boy all this time if I hadn't something fur it. The years I've had him on my hands,—ever since—Wally!"* the speaker broke off suddenly in his revelations. "Wally, you listen! Durned if I *don't* hear something a-sneaking and stirring in the mists!"

"It's—it's a dog," blurted out Wally, as Con loosened his hold, and Dick bounded in upon his old masters, barking cheerfully. "Blamed, if it ain't our own Dick! How in thunder did he hunt us out way off here?"

And, in the stir of surprise, Con was out of the thicket, unheard, and off into the saving mists,—off, reckless of ache or

pain or weariness now,—off, where at first Con did not know or think. He only felt he was off from the cruel old man, whose grip would have been on him in another moment if Dick's friendly leap had not turned keen-eyed Wally from the search. They would not harm Dick. Nat had raised him from a pup; and even Uncle Bill took pride in his size and strength, and often flung him a bone.

With the quick instinct of the hunted thing, Con had saved himself by loosening Dick; and now, his heart beating madly, he sped on through the mists, growing thicker and heavier with the night, until, all danger of pursuit over, he sank down upon a rock beside his way, to take breath. He was safe now: they could never track him in this white cloudland. Besides, thoughts were beginning to press upon Con's terror and bewilderment. They had wicked work to do to-night: they were going—to—burn old Gregory's house,—to burn the Manse!

Slowly but clearly the conversation, only half comprehended in his breathless affright, came back to Con as he sat panting and trembling in the mist. Uncle Bill and the boys were going to burn the

Manse. They were getting all things ready, oil, turpentine to soak the hay and straw, poison and shot to kill the dogs. They would steal down in the misty darkness, when everybody was asleep and fire the Manse; and it would smoke and crackle and kindle into a blaze that would light Misty Mountain from base to peak. For a moment the horror of the thing held Con stunned, spell-bound. Uncle Bill and the boys seemed to rise to awful heights which his fancy could not reach. They were going to burn the Manse when everybody was asleep,—all the maids and the men; the “Irisher,” who had driven him from the Christmas altar; the red-faced Nora, who had called him a thief; the—the—Con’s beating heart seemed to leap and stand still at the next thought: *the little girl* who had been so good to him,—she would be there asleep, too, when the boys fired the house. And she would choke, perhaps, as Uncle Bill had said, and—and—burn up. And Con started up, himself choking as the picture of Susie, with her sweet young face, her golden hair, her pitying eyes rose before him.

“Jing! She shan’t, she mustn’t! I—

I won't let her! I'll—" Like a lightning flash the resolve burst upon Con's bewildered brain: "I'll stop it! I'll go blow the whole durned thing! They'll get me," he continued, facing consequences with an unshaken soul. "They'll lock me up, like Pat Murphy said. They'll jail or hang me mebbe. But I don't—I don't care what they do. I ain't a-going to let that pretty little girl burn up."

And, sore, stiff, breathless, our young hero—for surely he deserves no lesser name—bounded off through the blinding, bewildering mists, to warn and save. At any time, the white vapors billowing and surging about him would have been confusing even to Mountain Con; for tree, cliff, beetling rock, jutting peak,—all landmarks were lost in a blurring blank.

Con knew every turn and twist of the mountain; but to-night he was not his keen, clear-headed, sure-footed, strong-limbed self. That olden Con would have curled up under a sheltering rock and let Uncle Bill and the boys do their worst; but something better than the old self had now wakened in the boy's breast and was driving him on. So, forcing his tired, aching limbs into fierce speed; bounding, leaping,

where he knew the way; pausing to grope for some guiding hold when the white cloud-veil was too thick to pierce; creeping on hands and feet around the edge of the cliff that he could not see; taking Injun Creek at one reckless spring; stumbling over hidden root and into sunken hollow; staggering, falling, scrambling to his feet and his path again,—Con kept his desperate way, no thoughts of safety or self turning him from his purpose: to reach the Manse before the boys could start the blaze that would mean danger, perhaps death, to the little girl who had been good to him. He was rushing, as he clearly realized, into old Gregory's grasp. He would be held, bound, put into the Reform that was "wuss than jail"; for neither justice nor mercy had entered into poor Con's sad experience. He would be locked up, beaten, starved, perhaps. Jing! he did not care fur that now; he must save the pretty little girl who had been good to him.

His fierce strength began to fail,—he found himself swaying on his feet, reeling forward dizzily. A sharp hurt roused him: he had stumbled against a projecting rock, and the blood was flowing from a cut on

his forehead. He caught up a handful of melting snow and pressed it to the wound. Head and eyes seemed to clear, and he saw that he was down the mountain. Through the mists came the blurred glimmering of the lights in the Manse, and a sound—a fierce, threatening sound—that chilled Con's bold young heart: the dogs,—the dogs that were loosened at night to guard the house; the dogs that old Bill had warned his boys would tear them into bits, the dogs that he, lawless, reckless intruder that he was, had neither shot nor poison to silence. Could he brave the dogs? Con thought of the huge wolf hound, "Boar," that always tugged at his chain with a snarl whenever he and Dick passed near the Manse. Boar, with his fiery eyes and fierce fangs, was loosened and on guard.

A tremor came over the brave boy's sinking frame. Dared he brave the dogs even to save the pretty little girl? Con stood staring at the glimmering lights of the Manse, fairly shaking with such fear as he had never felt before.

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The pleasant sitting-room of the great house was very cheerful and cosy to-night.

The heavy damask curtains were drawn, and a big hickory fire leaped on the wide hearth. Aunt Aline was knitting by the pink-shaded lamp, while Susie and Uncle Greg were deep in a game of checkers that was trying even the old soldier's skill. For Susie, usually no match for her uncle, had withdrawn to a double corner, and was gleefully eluding his most skilful attacks.

"There, there," said Uncle Greg, testily. "What's the good of dodging like that; you're beaten, Susie. Give up like a man!"

"Not yet," twittered Susie, suddenly pouncing out upon Uncle Greg's king. "What do you say to that, and that?"—as she jumped another and another.

"That you're a woman, you little rogue!" he laughed,—*"and women never give up. Take the game. I won't fight it out any longer. There will be a box of chocolates at your plate to-morrow, if I can get to town, to pay up."*

"Oh, I don't want any chocolates, Uncle Greg! I've got a big box upstairs now."

"Sugar almonds, then?" suggested the old gentleman. "I always liked them best myself."

"No, no sugar almonds either," said

Susie, who, with her pretty face supported on her hands, was surveying the grim old face doubtfully. Uncle Greg seemed in rather a good-humor to-night.

"Well, what would you like?" he asked. "I don't know much about little girls, you see, but I want to put this Christmas business through right. I'm off to Pineville to-morrow to make sure that young Gryce rascal doesn't slip my hands by any lawyer's tricking. What shall I bring you back? A doll baby, or a ring for your pretty little finger, or a watch maybe? By George, that's the very thing,—a nice little gold watch!"

But the soft dark eyes only studied the grim old face more wistfully.

"Oh, no, Uncle Greg! I don't need a watch. I have dear mamma's. Mother Benedicta is keeping it for me. If—if you would give me what I want most in the world, Uncle Greg—but," (the sweet young voice sank sorrowfully) "you couldn't, or you *wouldn't*, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't, eh? And why not, I'd like to know? Just try me!" answered Uncle Greg, his gruff tone softening. "Out with it, little girl! What do you want most in all the world!"

"Con!" ventured Susie, desperately.

"W-h-a-t?" roared Uncle Greg.

"Poor, poor Con!" continued Susie, bolder now that she had taken the first plunge into the storm.

"D'ye mean that wild, young mountain devil?" asked Uncle Greg, fairly gasping for breath.

"Oh, he isn't, Uncle Greg,—he isn't a devil at all!" Susie's spirit was up now, and she faced Uncle Greg fearlessly. "He is just a poor boy that has nobody to be kind to him. He told me so. He said he never had a father or mother or anybody; he had never been to church or school; he never had anything good or nice. And you're all hunting him down, as if he were not a boy at all, but a wolf or—or—a tiger. O Uncle Greg, I think you've been just too mean for anything to poor Con!"

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Uncle Greg, who was not used to such plain speech. "I'd like to know what you've got to do with it, Missy. I suppose this is some of your priest brother's meddling. Con,—indeed Con! You've been talking to him, you say,—talking to a wild young savage that is ready to burn the roof over our

heads; talking to a dirty young vagabond that ought not to have dared come near you!" Uncle Greg had started up from the table, now fairly apoplectic with wrath. "Con indeed! Don't let me ever hear his name upon your lips again while you are in this house. Con, forsooth! Con, thunderation!" Uncle Greg stamped out of the room; leaving poor little Susie, appalled at the storm she had roused, to fly into Aunt Aline's arms and burst into frightened tears.

"There, there, my dear!" soothed the good lady. "Your uncle can't stand crossing; he never could, young or old. And he is hard set on those people at the Roost; and with good cause, I must say. They're a bad lot, Susie dear, and ought to be driven off Misty Mountain."

"Driven where, Aunt Aline?" asked Susie, choking back a sob.

"Oh, I don't know," answered the lady, "but somewhere out of decent Christian people's way!"

"But if you drive all the bad people away you can never make them good, Aunt Aline." This was a problem that had never troubled Aunt Aline, who had walked only decent Christian paths,

where "bad" people did not intrude.

"Of course not, Susie dear! But we can't help that."

"Brother Phil thinks *he* can," said Susie, softly. "He is going to have a mission church in the slums where all the people are dreadful, and try to make them good."

"A church in the slums!" exclaimed good Aunt Aline in dismay. "God bless me, what *will* that boy be doing next?"

"I don't know," replied Susie, plaintively. "Maybe go to the Cannibal Islands and get eaten up. Then he would be a martyr; and Sister Mary Margaret says it would be a great thing to have a brother a martyr. But I'm not good enough to want anything like that."

"I—I never heard such talk!" said Aunt Aline, breathlessly. "The Cannibal Islands! Phil must be losing his mind,—though I saw no signs of it, I must say. Slums and Cannibal Islands! With money of his own to live comfortably and respectably!"

"Oh, but he can't!" Susie shook her golden head sagely. "Priests can't live comfortably and respectably, Aunt Aline. They have to go in all sorts of dreadful places—jails and prisons and hospitals

and leper islands,—making people good, just like Our Lord did, you know. He didn't drive bad people away; He wouldn't let them be stoned or hurt; and He took the good thief straight to heaven."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Aunt Aline, in fresh surprise. "The nuns must have taught you some Bible truths, after all, Susie. And Phil is one of the finest fellows I ever saw, if he *has* thrown all his chances in life away, as I was saying to your uncle to-night. But we all can't see alike; and I'd say nothing more to Uncle Greg about that wild boy in the mountain, Susie dear! It only angers him, as you see."

"Yes, I see," said Susan, sadly. "I was only going to ask him to send poor Con to brother Phil instead of the Reform. But it's no use in talking to Uncle Greg any more. O Aunt Aline" (Susie had turned away to the window and lifted the heavy curtain), "how funny it looks out to-night! We seem to be up in the clouds. I can't see the skies or stars or anything."

"It's the mist, dear!" replied Aunt Aline. "It always comes like this when winter begins to break."

"Oh, does it?" said the little girl,

wonderingly. "You see, I never was up here when winter broke before. I—I don't think I like mists, Aunt Aline."

"Why not, dearie?" asked Aunt Aline, who was one of those plump, comfortable ladies who took things as they were, and did not worry.

"I—I don't know!" answered Susie, with a little shiver. "You feel so lost without the sky and the stars, and everything. I can't see the oaks or the garden hedge. It is as if we were in cloudland, where nothing is sure—and—and all sorts of things might be hiding,—dreadful things we can't see."

"Nonsense!" said Aunt Aline, cheerily. "What could possibly be hiding in mist that breaks at a touch, my dear? I am afraid the nuns are making you fanciful, Susie. They must be fanciful, or they wouldn't think it right to wear such queer bonnets and shut themselves up behind locks and bars. Eh, God bless me!" Aunt Aline dropped her knitting and started to her feet, as Boar's thundering bark was echoed by half a dozen shriller yelps. "What can be the matter with the dogs?"

"O Aunt Aline, Aunt Aline, what is it?" cried Susie, flying from the window in

terror, as loud shouts added to the clamor without, Uncle Greg's voice rising above all in its sternest soldier tone.

"Jim, Jerry, call off the dogs,—call off the dogs, or they'll eat the young rascal alive! Træd him, did they, as he was scrambling over the stable roof? Bring him in here,—bring the young scoundrel in here, and let me find out what devilment he was at."

And while Aunt Aline, Susie, cook, housemaid, and everybody flocked out into the wide hall in alarm, Irish Dennis appeared at the doorway, half dragging, half upholding the pale, shaking, bleeding, almost fainting figure of Mountain Con,—brave, bold, heroic Con, who had dared even the dogs—to face this!

XI.—PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

"WE'VE got him, sir!" cried Dennis in breathless triumph. "Got him on the stable roof, that he tuk to like a wild-cat when the dogs had nearly torn the clothes off his back. Why they didn't ate him up entirely, God only knows."

Aye, only God knew,—God and the good angels whom He sends to aid His helpless little ones; for Con 'had dared beasts as fierce as those the martyrs had fought of old. His ragged clothes had been torn into shreds; his sturdy limbs were scratched and bleeding; his blue eyes looked out in dull bewilderment from a pale, desperate young face.

Uncle Greg needed no drumhead court-martial to judge the case. He fixed his condemning gaze upon the prisoner.

"Coming to burn us up, as you said, eh?" he questioned grimly.

"Yes," gasped Con, catching confusedly

at the words. "They're coming—to—to burn the house."

"To burn the house! God have mercy on us," gasped Aunt Aline.

"The murdering young divil!" rose the wrathful chorus from men and maids.

"Out with it all, afore I take the horse-whip to ye!" cried Dennis, fiercely. "Where was it ye were starting the blaze?"

"In—in the stable," went on Con, striving, in his bewilderment, for words of warning. "They're going to bring oil and turpentine, and poison for the dogs."

"Poison for the dogs—*my* dogs?" roared Uncle Greg. "Why, you—you—(a string of old soldier words punctuated the wrathful outburst) "I'll have you in worse than the Reform for this! Lock him up, Dennis,—lock him up until morning; and we'll have him behind bars, sure enough. Lock him up, and then search the place high and low. Oil and turpentine in the stables! Thunderation! Take that young villain away, Dennis, before I choke the life out of him."

"O Uncle Greg, Uncle Greg!" came a sweet, pleading little voice. "You don't understand at all, Uncle Greg. Con is telling you about some one else. He is

warning you, Uncle Greg. He didn't come to burn the house himself,—oh, I know he didn't."

"Naw! naw!" panted Con, struggling in Dennis' wrathful hold. "I came to—to blow—to blow it all. Never blowed before, but had to do it now,—had to do it for *you*, little Missy."

"For me,—for me? O Uncle Greg, listen to what Con is saying! Please listen, Uncle Greg. He came to tell you some one was going to burn the house to-night."

"Arrah, don't be heeding the lies he's telling, Miss!" said Dennis. "What does the likes of him care whether we burn or not?"

"I didn't," blurted out Con, his dulled eyes beginning to flash. "I didn't care for you or him" (turning a glance at Uncle Greg), "or none of you. I'd let you all burn up to ashes, mebbe. But I couldn't let no hurt come to that thar little girl,—that pretty little girl, that was so good and nice to me. So—so when I heard Uncle Bill and the boys talking about what they were a-going to do down here to-night when you were all asleep, I just had to come and blow 'em, if it killed me. I couldn't see the way clear, and I run and

tumbled; and had to jump Injun Creek, and cut my head agin the rocks, to get here before the boys could start the blaze. The dogs nigh scared me off. But I had to come agin them, too. I had to come and blow it all, about the oil and the turpentine and the poison, so you could stave off Uncle Bill and the boys, and not let the little girl get choked or burned."

"O Uncle Greg, Uncle Greg!" sobbed Susie, imploringly. "He did it for me,—for me!"

"Brother, I believe every word that boy says," put in Aunt Aline, with unusual decision.

"*I don't!*" declared Uncle Greg, fiercely. "He is lying,—lying to get on our soft side, Madam,—lying, thinking he will slip out of a tight place. Take him off, Dennis! Lock him up in the smoking-room, where he can do no harm for the night. Turn out all the men to watch and guard. Shut up the dogs from harm. It will be ten dollars extra for every man to-morrow morning if we catch these scoundrels trying any devilment on us."

It was an exciting night that followed at the Manse,—a night that poor little Susie, used to the calm, untroubled ways of

St. Joseph's, never forgot. When it was discovered that the telephone wires had been cut, Uncle Greg's wrath knew no bounds. A mounted messenger was sent out to give the alarm, and a band of sturdy and indignant neighbors gathered round the Manse for defence. The dogs were safely locked up out of reach of "poisoned sausage," and Uncle Greg himself took command of the ambush about stable and barns; while the women-folk gathered in the sitting-room, watching and trembling; and even Aunt Aline's calm nerves gave way.

"We ought to thank God for that poor boy's warning. We might all have been burned in our beds before day."

"Is it Buzzard Con, ma'am?" said Nora, indignantly. "Sure he is head devil of them all. Didn't ye hear him say as much?"

"No, we didn't,—we didn't," declared Susie. "Uncle Greg got it all wrong. Con came to tell,—just to tell and save us. Poor, poor Con! O Aunt Aline, can't we go in to the smoking-room and say a kind word to him?"

"No, my dear, we can't. Your uncle wouldn't hear of it," answered Aunt Aline, tearfully,—“though the poor boy may be

dying in there alone, for all we know. He looked ready to drop at our feet when they dragged him in. Go to bed, Susie dear, or you will be down sick to-morrow, with all this trouble and turmoil. Nothing will harm you, darling! There are strong men all around us in watch.—You go up with her, Kathie,” said Aunt Aline to the little kitchen-maid, who had come in with the other servants and stood in wide-eyed terror by the door. “Lie down on the couch in Miss Susie’s room, and both of you children go to sleep.”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep a wink to-night, Aunt Aline!” sobbed Susie.

“You must try,” said the lady. “Go up to your room, like a good child, and try.”

And, followed by the bewildered little Kathie, Susie obeyed.

There were no orphan asylums for miles around Misty Mountain, and Kathie was one of an orphaned brood that had been scattered among the charitable housewives of the neighborhood to “train” as best they could. Red-haired, wild-eyed Kathie had fallen into Aunt Aline’s care, and was the trial of her well-ordered establishment. “Sure she hasn’t the sinse to scour a pan!” cook and Nora declared;

for, in her bewilderment at her new surroundings, Kathie aroused their ire a dozen times a day. For the last week she had been more breathless and stupid still; for Susie, with her dainty ways and dainty clothes, had held her dumb with admiration. Hitherto she had never dared approach this lovely being, for Nora had sternly bade her 'keep her place'; and now—now to be ordered upstairs with her! Fairly speechless with delight, she followed Susie up into the pretty, spacious room, where a bright fire was blazing on the hearth, house plants were in winter bloom, and the windows and dressing table gay with flowered draperies.

As Kathie stood dazed in the midst of these glories, their little mistress dropped into the cushioned rocker and burst into tears.

"Don't—don't scare!" said Kathie, eagerly. "I'll set up here by the fire and take care of you. Nothing shan't hurt you,—nothing at all."

"Oh, I know, I know! I'm not afraid for myself at all. It's only for that poor boy downstairs. He just came to tell us, to save us,—to save *me*, he said; and now—now! O poor, poor Con!"

"Land!" Kathie's wide eyes popped wider at this broken explanation. "You ain't a-crying 'bout Buzzard Con! Why, he ain't no kin or 'count to you!"

"Yes, he is,—he is!" sobbed Susie. "O Kathie—is that your name?"

"It's what some folks call me," answered Kathie, feeling her present position demanded something more high-sounding. "My real right christen name is Katherine Rosabelle."

"I like Kathie better," said Susie. "O Kathie, do you think poor Con is dying down there in the smoking-room all alone?"

"Whot would he be dying for?" asked Kathie, staring. "Nobody ain't shot or cut him. My pap was shot."

"Shot!" gasped her little hearer. "Who shot him?"

"Dunno," answered Kathie. "Mar she always 'spicioned Wally Gryce. She were a-laying for him when she got snake bite and died herself. That's why we wus all orfants and had to be divided round. But Con he ain't shot or got no snake bite to hurt him."

"Oh, but he was all fainting and bleeding!" said Susie.

"Jest done out," Kathie nodded sagely,—*"done out and had scratched legs. But he is going to get wus than that. I heern Nora and Dennis talking 'bout what the old Captain's a-going to do to him: how he is going to shet him up behind bolts and bars till he's a growed man. Buzzard Con won't stand for that sure. He'll go lunny and they'll have to chain him down."*

"Chain him down!" echoed Susie, who was hearing things to-night she had never heard before.

"Yes," went on Kathie, whose experience had been wider and more varied. *"My Uncle Jim went lunny, and that's whot they did to him. And he bust loose and knocked his head against the wall, and kilt himself stone dead."*

Susie gasped with horror, as she recalled the breathless, blood-stained boy struggling in the sturdy Irishman's grip. Kathie's forecast did not seem improbable. She clasped her hands despairingly.

"O Kathie, it's just breaking my heart!"

"Don't cry no more!" blurted Kathie, as there seemed evidence of another burst of tears. *"I hate to see you cry. If you*

want me too, I'll—I'll get Buzzard Con out for you."

"You, Kathie!" exclaimed Susie.

"Yes," continued this new ally, breathlessly. "Cross your heart that you'll never tell, and I'll get him out."

"Oh, you can't, Kathie! I'll never, never tell on you; but you can't."

"Yes, I can," said Kathie, whose eyes had not been so wide-stretched all these weeks without seeing things. "Thar's a door opening in the covered porch of that thar smoking-room. They hez it locked up all the cold weather, but I know whar Nora keeps the key. I can get him out."

"O Kathie!" Susie jumped from her chair and flung her arms about the little kitchen-maid, "if you could, if you would, I'll—I'll love you forever, Kathie!"

That settled matters. Susie's conquest was complete. With arms still twined, the two small conspirators sank down on the softly cushioned divan before the fire, and made their plans to outwit all the grown-up powers combined against poor Con and set him free from Uncle Greg's relentless grip. It was an oddly contrasted pair: Susie with her pretty face, her golden hair, her dainty dress; and the

wild-eyed, red-headed little kitchen-maid, ready to risk all things in her service; for Kathie was venturing more than Susie could understand.

"I dussent go yet," said Kathie, "'cause the men are all out watching, and everybody is awake. But when it comes nigh morning and the fog is thick over things, and folks is all asleep, then I can sneak down quiet and easy, and get the key of that back door, and turn the lock soft so no one can hear, and let Buzzard Con out."

"O Kathie," exclaimed Susie in breathless gratitude, "you are the bravest and kindest and dearest girl I ever saw! Even Milly Martin, who is my very best friend at St. Joseph's, wouldn't do as much for me, I know. She wouldn't dare. Milly is awfully scary. She almost faints when she sees a mouse."

"Whot for?" asked Kathie.

"Oh, I don't know! She is just that way,—not like you at all. But she sits beside me in class, and we've been best friends for nearly two years, —ever since we were confirmed together and took the same name. She gave me a lovely pin for Christmas, and I gave her a ring. Kathie,

I'd like to give you something for Christmas, too."

"Me?" said Kathie, breathlessly.

"Yes, because you're so good and so kind to help poor Con. Let me see what I've got that you would like, Kathie." And Susie flung open her trunk and proceeded to pull over its pretty contents—handkerchiefs, collars, hair ribbons, stockings and slippers; for there were gala days at St. Joseph's when such little vanities were in demand. "Choose anything you want," continued Susie, who was in a reckless mood to-night. "How would you like this collar? Sister Patricia's aunt made it. It's real Irish lace. Or these white silk stockings? They are all embroidered in forget-me-nots for the last May festival, when I carried our Blessed Mother's banner. Or this?" She shook out a shimmering thing of rose and silver, gorgeous to behold.

"Land!" gasped Kathie, quite incapable of further speech.

"It is the scarf I wore when I was Roman herald in the Christian martyrs' play on Mother Benedicta's feast," explained Susie. "Would you like it, Kathie? You could wear it as a sash." And Susie draped the lustrous fold about Kathie's

sturdy waist with a practised hand.

"You—you don't mean to give this here to—to me?" stammered Kathie.

"Yes, if you'd like it," was the smiling answer.

"Like it! Land, I'd love it! But it's too grand and too fine for me. And Nora and cook and Dennis would jeer and sneer at me for sure if they seen me tied up in a grand sash like this. But I won't let 'em see it. I'll put it away till I'm growed up and get merried."

Kathie hurriedly slipped her new splendor under her checked apron as Aunt Aline appeared in the doorway.

"You can go to your own bed, now, Kathie. I'll stay here with Susie until she goes to sleep. For there is no more danger, dear! Sheriff Mott and his men caught those two dreadful Gryce boys as they were stealing up to the barn to do their wicked work. They were so startled that they didn't even make a fight. The sheriff has taken them off to the lock-up in the Gap. Thank God we were warned in time, or no one can say what would have happened!"

"And Con—poor Con that warned us,—did they take him, too?" faltered Susie.

"No," answered Aunt Aline. "Your uncle told the sheriff he himself would settle with Con."

"O Aunt Aline!"

"There, there! Don't let us have any more trouble about Con to-night," said Aunt Aline, a little sharply. "My nerves are all on edge now. Your uncle must have his way; he always does, and neither you nor I can change him.—Go to bed, as I told you, Kathie. It's past midnight, and no time for little girls to be awake."

"Don't scare," whispered a low voice in Susie's ear, as Kathie paused for a second on her way to the door. "I'll get him out for you,—I'll get him out, sure!"

XII.—THE MORNING LIGHT

It had been a long night for Con. Just what had happened to him he was at first too dazed to know. Dennis had flung him into the smoking-room with no very gentle hand, turned the key and left him to himself. And, sinking down dully upon a rug that felt very soft and warm after the hard flight over the mountain, Con was glad to rest his bruised, aching limbs, his dizzy head, without any thought of what was to come upon him next.

Uncle Greg's smoking-room was not at all a bad place. There was no nonsense about it, it is true: everything was stiff and rigid and soldierly; even the rug on which Con had dropped half conscious was the skin of a big grizzly that had nearly worsted Uncle Greg one dark night on the Rockies fifty years ago. There were a few pictures on the dark wood walls—grim old Indian fighters, whose names Con

would have known if he had ever been "let in" to school,—and a pair of huge antlers, bearing old-fashioned guns and pistols that had done their work and were rusting in honorable peace. There were jars of tobacco, and a pipe-rack that held almost everything that could be smoked.

But better than all these things, on which Con's eyes listlessly turned, there was a fire,—a big, roaring coal fire,—that filled the grim old soldier's room with warmth and glow, and seemed to wink in friendly fashion behind its iron bars, as if telling Con to cheer up. Con had never before seen so pleasant a fire; it seemed to charm the aches and pains out of his weary limbs, to set the young blood flowing through his chilled veins, to clear the clouds from his dizzy, throbbing head.

So comforting was the fire that, despite all his doubts and fears and dreads, Con, with his bruised and cut face pillowed on the old grizzly, fell fast asleep in the soothing warmth, to dream that he was back again in the log cabin under the bowering greens, with the "Mister" in his shining robes smiling at him. "You saved her, Con,—you saved the pretty little girl

who was good to you. You saved my little sister. I am waiting, watching for you, little pal. Come and be my brother. Come, come, come!" The words were in his ear, and there was a hand upon his shoulder. Con started up from his rough bearskin as if he had indeed heard the "Mister's" call. The grey light of the early winter dawn was struggling through a half-open door, and some one was shaking him desperately.

"Wake up!" came a gasping whisper. "Wake up, ye dumbhead! Wake up, Buzzard Con! Wake up, ef ye don't want to be locked and chained forever. Beat it, *beat it quick!*"

"How—what—who are ye?" said Con, staring at the small figure that was panting and trembling in the breaking shadows above him.

"I'm Kathie, and I promised—I promised her I'd let ye out. Don't stop to ax no more. The dogs is shet up and thar's the door. Get,—get!" As the bewildered boy started to his feet, the speaker clinched two sturdy little fists and delivered a double punch between Con's shoulders, that sent him spinning towards the open door. "*Get, I tell ye,—quick, quick!*"

And Con stumbled out into the morning light, a free boy again.

Kathie, drawing a long, quivering breath, closed and locked the door on the outside. Stealing back into the kitchen hall, she put the key in its usual place, and softly crept upstairs again, into the little bed at the sleeping Nora's side, where, after a prudent interval, she began to sniffle loudly.

"What's the matter?" asked Nora, rousing. "After all the fuss we had last night, can't you let a body rest?"

"I'm—I'm skeered," whimpered Kathie, — "skeered about them Buzzards gitting loose agin and—and—"

"Arrah keep quiet!" said Nora, tartly. "It's only half sinse ye have, as everybody knows. Go to sleep now, and don't be bothering me."

And so it was that when, a few hours later, the smoking-room, though still barred and locked from without, was found empty, and Uncle Greg's prisoner gone, no one thought for a moment of the little kitchen-maid who had been so "skeered" about the Buzzards and had only "half sinse."

"How the boy got out Heaven only knows," said Aunt Aline as she brought

up Susie's breakfast; for, after her night of excitement, the little girl had slept late. "Every door and window was locked and bolted, just as Dennis left it last night. Really, it looks like witchcraft, as the servants all say."

"And—and" (the little "witch," sipping her morning cocoa, found it hard to steady her trembling voice) "will Uncle Greg try to catch Con again, Aunt Aline?"

"No," answered the lady. "Between you and me, Susie, I think he is rather glad the boy is gone. For your uncle would have had to lock him up, as he had sworn; and Con's warning saved us, without doubt. Now he is gone, Heaven knows where; but we'll never see or hear of him again, I am sure of that."

And Con, speeding over the mountain as fast as his bruised and wearied limbs would carry him, felt sure of it, too. He had "blowed"; he had turned against Uncle Bill and the boys; he had broken away from his captors at the Manse; he had left only enemies behind him. Now he must escape while he could, and put miles of distance between him and Misty Mountain forever. He dared not stop even for a word with Mother Moll; for he had

turned against her boys, and she, too, was lost to him. Hungry, sore-limbed, homeless, he kept on his way, as only Mountain Con, hardened to pain and fatigue, could. Luckily, the rude heights over which he sped so desperately were no longer bleak and frost-bound. The mists breaking in the rising sun showed only paths softening to his tread; streamlets trickling through mossy stretches from which the snows had vanished; pines, that had dropped their ice sheaths, rising green and feathery along his way. He felt he must keep off the usual trails, lest he should meet Uncle Bill or the boys, of whose fate he had not heard; he knew only that he had "blowed," and must avoid them. For poor Con had broken the only law which he had ever been taught,—fidelity to his kind,—and he realized that he was an outcast indeed forever.

But now the sun was up, and the white veil of the mist threaded with golden beams, and all the terrors of the night had passed. Con found himself far below the Roost, in an old trail that had long been abandoned for the new wagon roads that cut closer to the railroad. There were no "cuts" about the old trail. It wound in

and out and around the mountain by slow, easy ways, which no modern traveller would stand; it circled all the rough climbs, and broadened into resting places under sheltering rocks and by crystal springs. It forded Injun Creek as best it could, and edged cautiously around the landslide that a few years ago had tumbled down to block its way. There were places where it seemed to vanish entirely in young growth of underbrush and pines; but a little farther on it straggled out again, marked here and there by the blackened stones or charred logs of camp fires made by hunters or picnickers, or other wanderers from smoother ways. The Misty Mountaineers themselves had no use for the old trail: 'It was too durned snaky and slow.'

Con struck the old trail this morning just where it doubled about a clear spring, gushing, full-fed with melting snows, from a beetling cliff. Then he stopped stock-still on his hurried way; for beyond the bend of the old road tents, wagons, horses, loomed up through the breaking mists. Gypsies! Con realized at one glance,—gypsies who sometimes wandered, in the late winter or early spring, through the

mountain passes, trading horses and dogs, telling fortunes, and doing worse things in their often lawless way.

The camp upon which he had come was still sleeping, and the unseen intruder was about to beat a prudent retreat when the silence was broken by a sound that made his heart leap, and held him to the spot. It was a yelp of joyous welcome that he could not mistake,—Dick's yelp, followed by a full canine chorus, that roused the slumbering camp into life and voice. Men and women started from tent and wagon, to find a strange boy in their midst; and the great tawny wolf hound they had tied to the wagon leaping, as well as his rope would permit, to greet his master.

"After our horses, are you?" cried the black-bearded leader of the band, gripping Con fiercely.

"No, I wasn't,—I wasn't touching your horses," answered Con, shaking off the hand on his shoulder with something of his old strength. "But I want this dog you've got tied up here. He's mine."

"Yours, eh?" said the gypsy, scowling, as Dick made another frantic leap forward, while his deep bay rose in confirmation of Con's word. "Who says so?"

"I say so," replied Con, stoutly; "and Dick says so, too, as you can all hear—don't you, Dick?" And Dick made another lunge forward that nearly broke his rope, while his loud bark answered the question.

"Get out, you young beggar!" said the man, angrily. "I sell dogs and buy dogs and swap dogs, but I don't give dogs up for the asking, not much,—do we, Carita?" and he nodded towards a bright-eyed, brown-faced little woman who, with a babe in her arms, had come out of the tent to his side.

"Is it the dog you found last night, Pippo?" she asked.

"Aye," answered the gypsy,—*"tied to a tree, left to starve and freeze. And now this here young thief is claiming him. But you don't get him,—no, not while I've got a rope or chain to hold him. You don't get that dog away from me if you holler for him all day."*

"What are ye going to do with him?" blurted out Con.

"Sell him," answered the man, curtly. Con's dull eyes flashed into light.

"Jing! then I'll buy him, if you won't let him loose any other way. I'll buy him."

And the desperate speaker thrust his

hand into the ragged pocket, where Mother Moll's parting gift had been secured through all his trials by a crooked pin. "I'll give you two dollars for him."

"Two dollars!" mocked the gypsy,—
"two dollars! Ye young fool! Two dollars for that dog! I'd get twenty for him anywhere 'long my road,—twenty, and maybe twice twenty if I slick him up."

Twenty dollars! Con's brain whirled. Twenty dollars! He had never seen or even heard of such a sum. Twenty dollars! He clinched his hands in fierce despair; they were too weak and numb this morning to fight even for Dick,—Dick, who was waking the echoes of the old trail in fierce impatience to be at his young master's side; Dick, who would soon be taken away from him forever. Even the "Mister" and all his kind promises were forgotten. Con could think of nothing but Dick,—Dick, the old comrade, the four-footed friend, whom he was losing forever.

Carita's eyes rested pityingly on the boy. She was a mother herself, this little gypsy; and the pale despair of the young face, the quiver of the young lips touched her mother-heart.

"They will scold you, beat you perhaps,

your father or mother, that you have lost the dog?" she said sympathetically.

"No," he answered. "I haven't any father or mother, I haven't no home, I haven't nothing or nobody, but—but just Dick. I'd fight you all, every one of you, for him" (he cast a defiant glance at the three men looking on), "if I could; but I—I can't. I can't even stand agin you no more." And, broken down at last by this final blow, Con staggered against a tree and sank down upon the ground at the little gypsy mother's feet.

"Ah, *Santa Maria!*" cried Carita; for, with her Spanish name and birth, Pippo's brown-skinned little wife had retained faint memories of the olden Faith. "He is dying,—the poor boy is dying, Pippo!"

"Let him die!" growled her husband. "What is it to us?"

"Ah, much, very much! It will bring the 'curse upon us, Pippo," said the little woman, excitedly,—“the curse upon our child. To turn away from the dying and give no help brings death quick and fast to our own; so did my mother always tell me,—my mother, who could read the stars and knew.”

"I tell you we can't wait now," answered

Pippo. "Load up the wagons, strike the tents, mates. We must be across the pass before they stop us as they did last year. Foolish Carita! Come, come! Let the boy alone. Get into the wagon."

But Carita's eyes flashed defiantly.

"And bring the curse upon my child—*your* child!" she cried. "Brute that you are to ask it of me, Pippo,—to bring death upon our little babe! My mother, who read the stars, told me, and she knew. I will not turn from this dying boy and bring death to my own."

"Have it your way, then," said Pippo, with an oath. "Since she will have it so—the fool woman!—fling the boy into her wagon, men, and bring him along."

XIII.—A SICK CALL

ON the same morning that Con was tumbled into the gypsy wagon, unable, as he truly said, to "stand agin them any more," Father Phil was just finishing his Mass at the church of St. Cyprian, whither he had been suddenly called by the illness of the pastor, his old friend and preceptor Father Timothy Burke.

"It's a shame to break up your holiday like this," said Father Tim, when his "boy" arrived and found him bound hand and foot with a bad attack of rheumatism. "But I waded knee-deep in the snow to a sick call on Christmas Eve; and that, with being up the rest of the Holy Night, finished me. I'm forgetting that I was seventy last St. Patrick's Day, and am overstaying my time."

"Not at all!" was the cheery answer, as Father Phil sat down by the old priest and gently smoothed his crippled hand. "You

are worth a dozen of us youngsters yet. All you want is a rest that will set you back twenty years—to the time you taught me my first catechism.”

“And you were the distraction of the class,” laughed Father Tim. “Little did I guess where the Lord was leading you, you little curly-haired rogue! But God loves the light of heart, I think. He so often chooses them for His own: maybe because He knows the weight that is before them,—the sorrows and the sins it will be theirs to lift, the dark ways they must tread to help and save. It’s no easy work you have taken up, my boy.”

“It’s only a case of ‘follow my leader,’” answered the young priest, smiling. “I have you to show me the way,—wading knee-deep in winter snows after your lost sheep. No wonder you are laid up.”

“And little good I did, after all,” sighed Father Tim, whose usual cheer had deserted him to-day; for an attack of rheumatism like this was enough to make the sturdiest of shepherds lose heart. “It was old Biddy Foran that sent her grandson for me, with the word that, in the next room to her, there was a sick man crying that there was that in his soul he must tell

before he died. Biddy, who says her Beads all day over her apple stand, knew only one man for such business, and so she sent for me. When the dying man saw my Roman collar, he nearly frothed at the mouth with rage and wanted to kick me out."

"To kick you out!" echoed Father Phil, indignantly.

"Yes," replied the old priest. "That is not altogether an unusual sentiment with lost sheep, my boy, as you will find. But, as he was quite unable to do any kicking, I stood my ground, while he cursed me as volubly as his failing breath would permit. The poor chap was in sore need. The tenement where Biddy lives is one of those wretched, ramshackle things that I've been trying for years to have pulled down, and this man was in its very worst hole. I saw to it that he had food and fire at least before I went; I knelt down by his bed and said an 'Our Father,' while he glared breathlessly at me; then sent a message to Dr. Jack Wilson, who is looking after the poor this winter, to drop in upon Biddy and her neighbors and see what could be done. What has become of the patient, I can't say, for this rheumatism got

me that night as soon as I finished Midnight Mass. I suppose he has gone, poor man! God have mercy on his soul!"

So, after this pious conclusion of the incident, it was with some surprise that Father Phil, as he finished his Mass this special morning, found the old apple woman waiting for him in the sacristy.

"Your reverence—" she began, dropping a respectful curtsy; for this tall, handsome young priest was a much more awe-inspiring figure than rosy, white-haired Father Tim. "Axing yer pardon for throubling you so airly, is there any chance of Father Tim being out to-day?"

"None in the world," was the decided answer. "He won't be out for another week (if I can keep him in," the speaker added mentally. "But I am here in his place; so if there is anything I can do for you this morning—"

"Sure and—and I don't know, yer reverence." Biddy twisted her worn hands in perplexity. "It was Father Tim the man wanted. He is far gone and won't live the day out."

"Oh, a sick call! Then I'll come at once," said Father Phil, briskly.

"And I'm not sure he will talk to you

at all, yer reverence," replied Biddy, anxiously. "It's no Catholic he is, poor man! When Father Tim came to him the other night the evil spirit himself couldn't have gone on worse."

"Oh, it's that fellow!" said Father Phil, recognizing the "sick call" that had laid his good old friend up. "So he is living yet, and wants a priest at last, does he?"

"No; yer reverence,—no, it's not the priest he wants: it's Father Tim. You see, Father Tim is old and soft and has a way with him; and whin he just noddod sort of friendly at all the poor sinner's mad talk, and ordered my Patsy out to get firewood and soup and wine, and sint the doctor to him, and said the prayer at his side, it somehow touched him, yer reverence; and he says that he has a story to tell afore he dies, and he'll tell it to no one but Father Tim."

"That's bad," answered the young priest, briefly. "But, since Father Tim can't go, I must. So lead the way, my good woman; and I'll see what I can do in Father Tim's place."

"I'm fearing it won't be much, yer reverence," said Biddy, despondently. "You see, Father Tim—"

"Is a dear old Irish saint," concluded the young priest, warmly. "I can't come anywhere near him in doing God's work, I know. But still I'm here to make a try at it. So we'll go at once."

And, buttoning himself into his heavy greatcoat, Father Phil started out without further hesitation.

It was a gloomy way that the honest old Irishwoman led. St. Cyprian's was the church in the Slums, of which little Susie had told Aunt Aline. It caught the tide of homeless, friendless strangers eddying in this floodgate of the New World at the darkest and worst. It held up its cross-crowned spire as a beacon in labyrinths choked with sin and suffering and sorrow in every form. Father Phil found himself following through narrow, high-built streets, into which even the bright morning sunbeams could not make their way; through alleys where the snow he had left white and spotless on the mountain-side was only filthy mire; into courts where even the pure winter air had grown heavy and foul. It was some ten minutes before Biddy reached the broken steps of the tottering old tenement she called her home. She paused at the doorway.

"I'll be going up and spake to him first," she said. "You'd best not go in, yer reverence, until I see whether the Evil One will rouse in him again."

"Let him rouse!" returned Father Phil. "It's my business to face him, my good woman, when a soul is in need of help."

And Biddy led on up flights of broken stairs, where every step was a pitfall, into the cobwebbed attic where the sick man lay. The door stood half open, to give him air. Biddy pushed forward without ceremony into the low-roofed room, to which, bare and wretched as it was, good old Father Tim's late visit had given some poor comfort. A fire burned in the rusty stove, where a pot of broth was simmering; there was a coarse blanket on the cot; wine and biscuits were on the table beside it; while several vials of medicine told that Dr. Jack Wilson had not been unmindful of his charge. The patient, a man of about five and forty, lay with closed eyes, seemingly asleep. The gaunt, sunken, ashen face already bore the stamp of Death.

"Arrah, and it's gone he is! God have mercy on him!" murmured Biddy as she bent over him

"No!" came the gasping answer, and the eyes opened in a blank, sightless stare.

"I—I can't see. Is the priest here?"

"He is," faltered Biddy.

Father Phil knelt down by the wretched bedside and took the icy hand in his own.

"I am here, my poor friend, in God's name to save you, help you."

But the dulling ear seemed only to half catch the kindly whisper.

"You're a man," came the husky answer,—*"a man to trust. You gave me help for hate, blessing for cursing. Under my pillow is a paper that I have kept for ten years. It was a bargain of devils—of devils—to—to—rob a child."*

"Ah, God pity him! His poor wits are wandering," murmured Biddy.

But Father Phil pressed the cold hand encouragingly. He knew that the soul, however darkened, often rouses at the last to remorse, contrition, desire to atone.

"The child," repeated the dying man, huskily,—*"the child may be living—still,—the child we flung out of the way—long ago. The child may be alive,—the child that—that—" the speaker struggled pitifully for utterance. "Will you—try—to find the child, and—and give him—back*

to—to—his own? Grip my hand closer—if you promise in the name of God, in whom you believe. Will you promise to find the child—we robbed—of all—all? Find the child and do justice.”

And Father Phil gripped the icy hand with a pressure felt even through the numbing chill, and spoke the promise solemnly:

“In God’s name, I will, if possible, do justice.”

An hour later, after doing all in his power for the poor parting soul, Father Phil closed the eyes of the dead man and breathed over him a fervent prayer to the Father of Mercies. Then, with the folded paper that he took from under the pillow, he returned to Father Tim, who heard the story of his sick call with pitying interest.

“Ah, God rest the poor soul! He was sore tempted into evil ways, I am sure; and the Lord is merciful to them that are not taught rightly to love and serve Him. Open the bit of paper and read it, Phil. Let us see what was troubling the poor man’s last hour.”

And Father Phil unfolded the paper, that had been indited, so it seemed, re-

cently, in a trembling scrawl. It held a smaller sheet, yellowed and stained, within. On this last was written in a clearer, steadier hand: "Charles Owens Nesbitt, the son of Charles Nesbitt, and Elinor Owens, his wife. Saved from the wreck of the P. & B. Limited on the night of October 16, 19—. Taken by me, Wilmot Elkins, from his cousin, Arthur Bell Nesbitt according to agreement. Money paid..."

Then followed a list of dates and sums extending over a period of more than eight years.

"God bless us!" exclaimed good Father Tim in perplexity. "There's money enough marked down there to roof a church. What do you suppose it all means, Phil?"

"Rascality of some sort," answered Father Phil, briefly.

"Ah! do you think so, lad?" sighed Father Tim. "God have mercy on the poor man that was trying to confess it at the last! Was there any sign of sorrow in his heart, Phil?"

"I think there was," said Father Phil. "You had reached it somehow. He said you had given him help for hate, blessing for cursing."

"Listen to that now!" said Father Tim,

his old face kindling. "When all I did was to send out Patsy for an armful of wood and a few biscuits and some soup. Is there anything like the grace and mercy of God to sinners? I'll say Mass for that poor soul as soon as I can get up on my feet. There's many a good thief that gets to heaven at last."

Father Phil did not hear: he was closely studying the yellowed paper before him.

"Five, six, eight thousand dollars," he counted. "'Paid according to agreement.' For what? Some sort of scoundrelly work is behind this, Father Tim. It means blackmail or 'hush money.'"

"Now, now, now, don't be judging rashly, Phil!" pleaded Father Tim, still tender to his "black sheep." "And Nesbitt is a decent Catholic name, lad. I've been saying Mass for the dead Nesbitts this many a year. Every Christmas there comes an offering to St. Cyprian's. We don't know what all this means. Read the other bit of paper, and maybe it will tell us more."

XIV.—A STRANGE STORY

FATHER PHIL took up the outer paper. It was a long sheet, written on both sides, and rather illegibly, by a trembling hand. The lines were irregular, broken by dashes and blots. It was dated only ten days before, on Christmas Eve, when Father Phil had said Mass in the log cabin.

"I am dying," it began,—“left to die like a dog that can bite and hunt no more. I am telling the truth, to which I will swear with my last breath,—the truth about the child, Charles Owens Nesbitt,—that truth and nothing but the truth. I was coming East from California on the P. & B. Limited, on October 16, 19—. At Colorado Springs, Arthur Nesbitt boarded the train. He had with him a colored nurse and a child of less than three years old. I had known Arthur Nesbitt before when we were in Frisco. We had been room-mates for a while when we were both

'down and out,' as I was still on this night that we met again. But he had struck luck since, had been taken up by rich relations in the East, while I had gone down lower every year. He would have cut me dead, but I thought I might touch him for a few dollars, so put myself in his way.

'Married, I see?' I asked after we had spoken to each other.

"'No,' he said. 'That is my cousin, Charlie Nesbitt's kid. The mother and father are dead. I am bringing him home.'

"Then, as we drank and smoked together, he warmed up a bit, and let out the grouch that I could see was in him. The kid meant tough luck for him. Its grandmother (his aunt) had quarrelled with the child's father about his marriage, and taken her nephew Arthur up in his place. But now the 'young squaller,' as he called the little Nesbitt in the Pullman behind us, had cut him out clean. The old lady had sent for the child at once when she heard of its mother's death. The father had died more than a year ago. This youngster would step into everything, and the Nesbitts had millions.

"'And you've been counting ahead,' I said knowingly. His face blackened with

a look that showed me I had struck the truth. 'The kid is in your way sure,' I went on, trying to keep on his right side; for he had plenty of money still, and I was down to my last dollar. 'Pity you couldn't chuck him out of the window,' I tried to joke.

"'I'd like to,' he said, his face blackening still more; and then, though he tried to laugh the words off, I knew that I had struck another truth, and that, with all his pockets full as they were, Arthur Nesbitt was desperate.

"I now began to tell him something of my own troubles. I had got into a scrape gambling in Frisco, and had to leave quick or be pinched. He heard me, chilly as an iceberg; but lent me the five dollars I asked, and told me good-night.. It was a dirty shake off, as I felt; for I had stood by him in many a tighter place years ago. Then Arthur Nesbitt went to his own berth in the Pullman sleeper, done with me, as I knew he meant to be, forever. And I was sitting in the smoker, still thinking of what he had said, and wondering how I could get more out of him, when the crash came.

"There is no need to tell about that: the

papers were filled with it for days.—the worst railroad wreck that had happened for years; and in a wild stretch of mountain, far from help. I was knocked dizzy for a few moments; but, when I came to, found I was not hurt. I groped my way out of the derailed car into the horrors without, of which I can not tell. One-half the train had plunged through a broken trestle. There was some human pity still in my heart, and I went around, dragging victims from the wrecked and burning cars, and helping where I could. It was then I came upon the child and its nurse. The poor woman, caught in the wreckage of the Pullman, had thrust the child through a broken window of the car, and was crying piteously for help. ‘Take the baby some one,—take the baby! He is little Charlie Nesbitt, and he has rich folks in N—— that will pay you to be good to him. Save my baby, please, sir,—please!’

“I took the child from the poor creature (she herself was pinned helplessly in the ruined car), and, turning around, faced Arthur Nesbitt. He had saved himself somehow, though with a broken arm, and like one dazed.

“‘Here is the child,’ I said hurriedly,

for I meant to keep on with my work among the victims. 'I'm afraid it's all up with the nurse.'

"'Curse your meddling!' he murmured.

"Then I understood. The burning car seemed to flash its light upon me. It was the chance of my life to hold this man, devil that he was, in my power,—the chance of my life, and I took it.

"'It's not too late,' I said quickly.

"'For what?' he asked.

"'To chuck the kid,' I answered. 'Give me that wallet in your pocket and I'll do it for you.'

"'You mean—?' His voice shook.

"'No,' I said bluntly: 'I'm no baby-killer. Talk quick before the crowd comes down. That wallet in your pocket and all it holds, and I'll take the child where you will never see it or hear from it again. It will pass for dead with the rest. The wallet, and I'll make off with the kid that's in your way! Quick! Is it a bargain?'

"He stared at me bewildered like for a moment. I think he was half mad with the shock and the fright, or the thought of the chance he had missed when I showed him the child safe. Then he thrust the wallet into my hands. 'There's fifteen

hundred dollars in it. 'Take it,' he said with a curse, 'and do as you say.' And I took it, and made off with the child."

There was a blot here; the lines were growing more and more illegible, as if some false strength that had sustained the writer was giving way.

"Put—with some Negroes until morning; then—kept on; found a trail across the mountain—moonshiner's cabin,—said wife would take care of child if I would pay. Gave him what he asked,—an old rascal; jailed next year, I heard; set him up a while—then struck Arthur Nesbitt again—hush money—hush money till—till—" The story broke off here in a hopeless scrawl.

"And is that the end, Phil?" asked Father Tim, who had been listening with breathless interest.

"Yes," was the answer. "And a scoundrelly end it is. A precious piece of villainy it shows up—if it is true."

"If it's true, as you say, lad," remarked Father Tim, pityingly. "I'm misdoubting it myself, Phil. It may all be a fever dream. The dying have queer fancies sometimes. There was poor Dan Devlin crying out to me that he had killed

his wife, when the good woman was safe at his side that minute, praying the Lord to save his soul."

"Maybe he had tried the killing," said Father Phil, grimly.

"Oh, no, no! Dan wouldn't do the like of that," replied his old pastor, assuredly; "though he might have struck her a blow now and then, when he had taken a drop too much, and that was troubling his mind. It's the Lord's own teaching that we mustn't judge, Phil. I'm thinking that all this queer story is a sick man's dream."

"Perhaps," answered the young priest; "though the first part of the story runs mighty clear for a dream. A cold-blooded rascal he must have been."

"Ah, that we can't tell, Phil!" replied his old friend,— "we can't tell till we know the temptation. But for the grace of God you and I, put in his place, might have done the same. When you've been dealing with sin and sorrow as I have for nigh fifty years, lad, you'll understand better those words of the Holy Book: 'For He knoweth our frame: He remembereth we are but dust.' I was a dull chap at school, Phil; and it was only my poor old mother's prayers, I believe, that ever got me into

the seminary at all. I never had the head for deep book-learning, though I did my best. 'Never mind, Tim,' said good old Father Earl when I floundered in my philosophy; 'you can get to human hearts and souls without all this. There is a wisdom that isn't taught in schools.' And I believe there is," added Father Tim, simply. "And though you're fitted maybe for other things, Phil, you'll learn more of the Lord's mercy around St. Cyprian's than any book can teach."

"I'm sure I shall," answered Father Phil, with a meaning his old friend was too humble to catch. "But in this case we must not forget that there may be justice as well as mercy involved. And so, if you will allow me to keep this paper for a while, I will put its truth to the test."

"Then do it, lad!" said Father Tim, heartily. "You are younger and cleverer than I am, Phil. Do it, in God's name."

And, with this permission, Father Phil set forth to investigate as best he could, after all these years, the truth of Wilmot Elkins' startling confession. That it might all be the delirious fancy of one given to drink or drugs, the young priest knew; and, from the dying man's ap-

pearance, it did not seem unlikely that he had been addicted to one or both of these soul-destroying habits. His story, written intelligently at first, as if under some unnatural stimulant, had broken down at the end, as if powers quickened by that stimulant had failed.

Although Father Phil felt doubtful of the whole business, his promise to the poor dying wretch remained: he must try to do *justice*. And, with this promise in mind, he turned back to the wretched tenement in which Wilmot Elkins had died, thinking that perhaps from some of those who had rendered the last duties to the dead man he might learn something of his past. But good old Biddy Malone met him at the door with a warning:

"I was to put a letter he gave me in the box as soon as he died; and there's a saycret society sworn to bury him. They are upstairs now. Ye'd best have nothing to do with them, yer riverence."

And, knowing a Catholic priest's standing with "saycret societies," Father Phil felt that Biddy was right; and, instead, went on his way to the city library to consult the files of old newspapers, that were in such orderly array

he found without difficulty the date October 16, 19—.

There indeed, in black headlines that had not faded with years, was the story of a railroad wreck terrible in its destruction and loss of human life. Father Phil, who had at first given only a casual glance at the column, dropped into one of the library chairs and read with breathless interest. The newspaper narration corroborated Wilmot Elkins' story in every detail,—the broken trestle, the derailed cars in the mountain wild, the burning wreckage, the piteous cries for help rising in the darkness, the aid that came too late to help or save. Beneath was the long, harrowing list of dead, injured, missing,—the last explained sadly by the charred ruins of half a dozen cars, in which many bodies were absolutely beyond recognition. Among the injured Father Phil's quick eye caught the name, "Arthur J. Nesbitt, arm broken, and suffering seriously from shock"; while the list of "missing" held the sadder items: "Charles Owen Nesbitt, two years; and his nurse, Caroline Jackson, colored; both in the Pullman sleeper, and supposed to be among the unrecognized dead."

XV.—SUSIE GUIDES

FATHER PHIL read the newspaper article twice; then he took Wilmot Elkins' paper from his pocket and reread it carefully. That they agreed in every particular even to Arthur Nesbitt's broken arm, he could not deny. And if the child had been stolen, robbed of name, home, and heritage, and flung away into rough, cruel, evil hands by these two dastards, it was plainly his duty to unmask the evil-doers, reveal the crime,—to do "justice," as he had promised the dying miner.

But how and where? He next turned to the City Directory. There were three columns of Nesbitts, from a major-general in the United States Army to dealers in shoe-leather and bacon, hardware and eggs. There was a John A. and a Henry A. and a Francis A. Nesbitt, but no Arthur Nesbitt at all. And if there had been, how could

Father Phil confront an absolute stranger with this wild accusation of a dying, perhaps a delirious man? So he put aside newspaper and Directory, pocketed the scrawled effusion of Wilmot Elkins, and returned to St. Cyprian's to report the result of his investigation to Father Tim.

"Ah, well, well!" said the old priest, nodding. "It's a queer business from first to last,—the man that was no Catholic sending for me, and you going to him when he was too blind to see, and the strange story that he tells,—a story that, as we have learned, must be more than half true. I'm thinking the finger of God is here somewhere, pointing us to ways we can't see. It's time to pray, lad,—pray for the light. And if it is the Lord's will that we should do anything more, that light will come to us somehow, Phil. And the poor fellow was buried by a secret society, you say. God have mercy on him that was never taught His holy ways! There's no telling what grace touched his soul at last."

There was a letter waiting for Father Phil when he went to his room that same evening. A tender smile lit his grave face

as he recognized the little schoolgirl hand. He opened it and read this somewhat lengthy communication:

THE MANSE, January 3.

"DEAR, DEAR BROTHER PHIL!—Such dreadful, dreadful things have happened since you left! The Buzzards tried to burn the house the other night, and poison the dogs so they couldn't bark, and, Aunt Aline says, to *murder* us all. And Con—your Con, *my* Con, brother Phil,—heard them talking about it; and he ran through the dark night, when all the mountain was in clouds of mist, and let the dogs nearly tear his clothes off him, and climbed the stable roof, and was hunted down like a wild Indian by Dennis and everybody, just to tell for my sake, he said, brother Phil, so I wouldn't be burned up,—to *tell* and save us. But Uncle Greg nor Dennis nor anybody would believe this. They thought he was bad as the rest, because they caught him on the stable roof; and so they locked him up in the smoking-room all night. And the neighbors came with guns and pistols, to help Uncle Greg to watch for the other Buzzards; and they caught them with oil and turpentine and everything ready to burn the barn.

"The men carried the other Buzzards off to the lock-up; but they left Con to Uncle Greg, who said he would put him in the Reform next day. And, oh, that nearly broke my heart! For I thought that poor Con would go crazy at being locked up; and so—so—oh, I haven't dared tell anybody this, brother Phil—I coaxed Kathie, the kitchen-maid, who knew where Nora kept the key of the outer door of the smoking-room, to steal down early in the morning and let poor Con out. Oh, was it such a bad thing to do, brother Phil? I don't know. The Sisters never taught us about dreadful things like these. We never heard of Buzzards burning houses, or of locking up poor boys that come to tell you and save you. So I don't know whether it was wicked or not; and I can't ask anybody, because it would be telling on Kathie and breaking my word. And, oh, it's all made me feel so queer and nervous and shaky that I am almost sick!

"And Dr. Grayson—he is Lil Grayson's father—says it is 'nervous shock.' He is going to take Lil to N—— to spend a week with her grandmother; and he will take me, too, for a change. So I will be in N—— on Tuesday, brother Phil; and won't you

please come to see me right away, and tell me whether I did anything very bad in letting poor Con out?

"Your own little sister,

"SUSIE.

"P. S.—Lil's grandmother lives in a lovely place in Riverdale. It is called—something about a tree—Oakwood or Elmwood, I forget which. Oh, please come right away, brother Phil! I want to see you so much,—*so much!*"

"My poor little girl!" thought Susie's brother, anxiously. "No wonder she has nervous shock. Let the boy out, eh! The little witch has more pluck than I thought. I must go see her, as she says, right away. Riverdale? I can get there in an hour. And I suppose the old lady's name is Grayson. Though Susie is a little vague, no doubt I can find the place,—named after a tree."

And Father Phil set out hurriedly; for he was somewhat troubled at his little sister's tidings. She was not very strong, as he knew; and the excitement at the Manse must have been a shock, indeed, to one whose sweet young life had been hitherto so safely sheltered. And Con, poor Con,—Con who had risked everything to

save her, as Father Phil well understood! And as he recalled the look in the boy's blue eyes at their last meeting, Susie's brother felt his heart turn towards his young "pal" with a tender compassion, that banished all thoughts of Mr. Wilmot Elkins' story from his mind: He must track Con somehow. He must find, help, save his poor little mountain friend.

Meanwhile the trolly was bearing him far from St. Cyprian's, into wider, brighter ways than those he had chosen to tread with Father Tim. Riverdale was an old-fashioned suburb of the great city, that had held its own against time and change. The old homes still stood back, amid groves and gardens whose high stone walls gave them an almost cloistral seclusion from the busy world without. As Father Phil looked down the wide, quiet roadway where the trolly had left him, he realized that Susie's directions had been by no means clear. Fully a dozen fine old homes, any one of which might have been occupied by "Lil's grandmother," lifted their gabled roofs and dormer windows and ivied walls in sight.

"I am looking for a family named Grayson," he said to a schoolboy who, with his

skates slung over his shoulder, came hurrying by.

"Don't know 'em," was the brief response.

"They live out here somewhere, at a place called Elmwood or Oakwood," said Father Phil.

"Oh, Elmwood! That's right across there," replied the would-be skater, who had been "kept in" and had no time to waste. "You'll see the name on the gate."

And, with a friendly "thanks!" Father Phil now turned across the street to the iron gate that bore, indeed, in tarnished letters the name "Elmwood." It swung open at his touch, admitting him into the broad carriageway that led to a fine old mansion, pillared and porticoed in the spacious fashion of a century ago. But there was no sign of decay or neglect. Box-bordered paths, garden beds, hedges, showed trim and neat even in their wintry snow wreaths,—a wide conservatory stretching on the south side of the house. There was a bronze knocker bearing a crest—Elmwood evidently disdained any modern substitute. "Lil's grandmother must be an old lady of importance," thought Father Phil, as his knock re-

sounded from the oak-panelled door. It was opened, after something of a pause, by an old Negro in faded livery.

"Yes, sah,—yes," he answered, putting his hand to his ear. "Who is it you wish to see? I's a little hard ob hearing dese days. Miss Rayson? Yes, sah; she is at home, sah,—she is at home."

"My little sister is visiting here," Father Phil tried to explain, as he handed his card.

"Yes, sah,—yes," nodded the old butler, who evidently felt he had heard enough; and he flung aside the damask portières of an arched doorway and ushered the visitor into a suite of stately rooms, terminating in the glowing beauty of the spacious conservatory. "Miss Rayson, she's at home, sah, to-day."

And, finding further explanation to this deaf old personage impossible, Father Phil decided to await the appearance of "Lil's grandmother" to introduce himself as Susie's brother. His little sister was evidently in more splendid surroundings than her simple life had ever known. All around were evidences not only of great wealth, but of the cultured taste that can use wealth fittingly: old furniture, old

tapestries, pictures mellowed into fuller beauty by the touch of time; farther, in the white gleam of marble busts, the stretch of richly fitted bookcases, an open piano, a shrouded harp; beyond these, the plash of a fountain under the crystal roof of the conservatory. Yet what a strange, deathlike hush there was in all this splendor. Not a voice, not a laugh to break the stillness,—and with two little girls in the house!

“Can Susie be ill?” thought Father Phil, anxiously. And then, as “Lil’s grandmother” still delayed, he began to pace the room restlessly; for there seemed something oppressive in the stillness that “got on” even his steady nerves. Susie must be ill, he felt; and in his anxiety he paced farther in through the arched doorway of the library—when suddenly he paused, startled breathless almost, as if he had received an electric shock. Facing him on the opposite wall was the life-size portrait of a boy, who seemed to be parting the richly colored draperies about him and stepping into the silent room,—a rosy, radiant, smiling boy, whose eyes looked up into Father Phil’s with a glance that he *knew*. For, despite the smoothed ripple

of the yellow hair, the buckled shoes, the picturesque, princely dress, it was Father Phil's little "pal" that looked out from that wondrous canvas,—it was Con of Misty Mountain to the very life!

"I beg your pardon!" a gentle voice broke in upon his bewilderment. "You—you—asked for me, I think. I am Eunice Rayson."

And Father Phil turned his startled eyes from the picture to meet the questioning gaze of a slender, graceful woman of about thirty, who was looking at him with evident surprise.

"Miss Rayson," he echoed,—*"Miss Eunice Rayson! I thought—I believed—it is for me to beg pardon; for I must have made a stupid mistake. I came here thinking this was Mrs. Grayson's residence. My little sister is visiting her granddaughter."*

"Poor Uncle Joe probably did not understand you. But I think there are two little girls visiting at Oakwood, Mrs. Burnett's place, just beyond."

"Burnett!" repeated Father Phil. "The little girl is named Grayson."

"Mrs. Burnett is her mother's mother, perhaps," said the lady, smiling. "We all

must have two grandmothers, you know.”

“Of course! What a very stupid person I must seem! Pardon me again! You see, we priests get dull in the ways of the world, from which we are shut out so long.”

“Father Philip Doane could not possibly be dull in anything,” said the lady, archly; “at least so I have heard from my cousin, Jack Fenton, who was his classmate and friend.”

“Jack Fenton!” Father Phil’s face kindled at the name. “God bless him! Is dear old Jack your cousin? I left him in Rome with the Jesuits, where he has a long road to travel yet. And dear old Jack is your cousin, and this your home?”

“Not exactly,” she laughed; “only my abiding place, Father Doane. I am here—in service, perhaps you might call it.”

“A very good name,” he assented cheerfully. “We are all in service, or should be, Miss Rayson.”

“That is true,” she answered. “And mine is as light and sweet and well rewarded as I could ask. I am secretary, companion, and, I hope, friend, to the dear old mistress of this beautiful home Mrs. Lavinia Nesbitt.”

XVI.—FOLLOWING THE LIGHT

"MRS. LAVINIA NESBITT! Nesbitt! Nesbitt!" Father Phil caught his breath as he repeated the name Miss Rayson mentioned. He surely had misunderstood. "I beg your pardon! Did you say—"

"Mrs. Lavinia Nesbitt," repeated Miss Rayson, simply. "Perhaps you know the family. They have lived here a long time—sixty or seventy years,—and the 'old Madam,' as we call her, is the last of her immediate line. She is lonely and childless, and needs love and care; for her life has been very sad. So I am here" (there was something very bright and pleasant in the lady's voice and smile) "to take, so far as I can, a daughter's place."

"And—and—" (Father Phil's usually clear head was in a bewildering whirl) "she has no one but you,—no family, I mean?"

"She has relations," answered Miss Rayson, guardedly, "but no one very near

or dear. Years ago she had a great sorrow that has darkened all her life. Since then she has lived apart from all the outer world, in her old home with her old servants. For the last three years, at the suggestion of her pastor, Father Brooke, she has had *me*."

"A wise addition to her household, I am sure." Father Phil felt as if he were talking in a dream.

"Well, perhaps," smiled the lady. "I do my best to brighten things; but—but that is not much. It is rather a sad and silent house, as you see. I was watching the little girls playing in Mrs. Burnett's ground this morning, and wishing I could bring some young life here."

"You have it portrayed at least most beautifully," said Father Phil, turning to the picture that had so startled him. "That is really a wonderful canvas. A portrait, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Miss Rayson. "That is—the old Madam's only son. The picture was painted by a great French artist when the boy was only twelve years of age, and is, I have heard the old servants say, a remarkable likeness. He died young. It was all very, very sad."

They stood silent for a moment before the picture,—the picture whose blue eyes seemed to meet Father Phil's in an appeal he could not resist. He should be going to find Susie. Really, there was no excuse for him to linger, to wonder, to—to question. But, but perhaps because "Jack's" cousin was so friendly, the words burst forth almost against the speaker's will:

"It is a most startling likeness! Miss Rayson, would it be intrusive to ask you how, when, where that boy lived—and died?"

"He lived here" (Miss Rayson seemed to think nothing strange in the question, for the portrait awoke a vivid interest in all who saw it,—“the idol, the spoiled darling of this beautiful home; he was his widowed mother's all. He died—ah, that is the sad part of it!—exiled from her heart, her home, her life. It is the old story, Father: a marriage that displeased, disappointed, angered the mother into words the son could not forgive. And so he died, and her heart broke, and her life was darkened forever. Poor old Madam—there is her bell calling me now!” Miss Rayson started as a silvery sound came

and I am only too glad to have her here with Lil. As Lil's father said she needed a change: she was all upset with those wild doings up at the Manse, and could neither eat nor sleep. She would have been down with nervous fever in another week. But we are fixing that all right," laughed Lil's grandmother. "If you could have heard the crowd of them in here last night! It's well we're not next door to that poor Nesbitt woman. We'd drive her into the madhouse outright."

"Oh, not so bad as that, I hope!" said Father Phil.

"I don't know," answered the old lady, nodding. "I've had twelve years of them, you see, and am used to hullabaloo from morning to night. But when you've had neither chick nor child about you for twenty years or more, and sorrow enough for three women besides (though she can't blame the good Lord for that: it was her own doing from first to last, as I've always said), it's no wonder that children's voices and children's laughter are more than she can bear."

That Lil's grandmother was a kindly old gossip, Father Phil could see.

"I went into your neighbor's house

through mistake," he said. "Susie's direction was not very clear. It does seem a sadly quiet place compared to this."

"Quiet?" echoed the old lady. "It's like a morgue! There's a chill comes over me as soon as I cross the threshold,—which I do every now and then, as I believe all good neighbors ought. Sometimes the old Madam will see me, and sometimes she won't, though we were friendly enough twenty years ago. But I said my say when she turned against her boy for loving and marrying to suit himself, as every man and woman should. They tell me she spends half her days sitting before his picture and talking to it as if it had life. But you can't harden your heart against your own and not suffer sooner or later. When my Dick ran off at nineteen and married a chorus girl, I felt sore enough, too. A pair of young fools they were; but we took them in, and there isn't a better wife or mother in all the country than that girl has made. Her boy is out with Lil and Susie now. I always have half a dozen or so of them round the house. It keeps things cheerful for me, now that father is gone. Ah, I often think what a different place Elmwood

would have been if the grandchild had lived."

"The grandchild!" echoed Father Phil, breathlessly. "You mean that the dead son—that the boy in the picture—left a child?"

"Aye, a fine child!" went on Lil's grandmother, now in the full tide of friendly gossip. "And that seemed where the judgment of God fell, indeed. For, though Lavinia Nesbitt's heart was cold and hard to the last to the poor young mother, when she died it turned to the child, the son of her son, the boy that had his father's name, that she would have taken to her heart and home in his father's place. So she sent for him; but on the way back to her, child and nurse were killed in a railroad wreck—and—"

The gentle, droning voice went on in dread detail. But her listener was spell-bound: the light had burst upon him in dazzling radiance, revealing the truth that he could no longer doubt. The tangled thread of Wilmot Elkins' story straightened into clear, unbroken lines. The child snatched by evil hands from his dying nurse's arms, sold like a chattel near the flaming wreck in the mountain;

robbed of name, home, birthright; consigned to wild, rude, cruel care,—that child, Father Phil felt and knew, was Con of Misty Mountain, the little pal who ‘didn’t belong to nobody,’—Con who had saved his little sister, and whose blue eyes had looked out at him from his dead father’s picture! Con was Charles Owen Nesbitt, heir and master of the splendid home he had just left!

And it was for him, Father Philip Doane, to show, declare, prove it; for him to “do justice,” as he had promised the dying wretch who had wrought this evil; for him to denounce and unmask the villain who bore the guilt of all. It was well that long years of training had given Father Phil stern self-control: he needed it now, to conceal the emotion thrilling heart and soul; to meet Susie, who came flying in, rosy and breathless, to greet him; to shake hands with Lil and Dick and Fred, and half a dozen more “cousins”; to hear about the coasting frolics and taffy pulls and matinées that were on his little sister’s programme for the week.

For Susie was having the “grandest time” of her life, as she openly declared. Lil’s grandmother could be trusted for

that, as Susie's brother plainly saw, when he was drawn in to the twelve-o'clock luncheon and said grace for a table full of rosy, happy youngsters, with appetites which had been sharpened to razor edge by a morning on Colonel Bigsby's pond. Such a good, old-fashioned luncheon as it was! For there were no frills or folderols at Lil's grandmother's. Even Gladys, whose mother kept a butler and a chef, passed her plate three times for creamed chicken; and Fred, who was kept strictly on Graham bread at home, piled in hot biscuits in a way that would have made his mother faint; and Susie—well,—it was evident that the doctor's tonic was no longer needed, as Lil's grandmother said. Only Father Phil sipped his tea absently, and, to that good lady's disappointment, could not eat at all.

"You're not sick, brother Phil?" asked Susie, anxiously, as, the luncheon over, grandmother scattered the others and left brother and sister in the big parlor to have a talk to themselves.

"Not a bit!" he answered cheerily. "Come sit down beside me on this cushiony old sofa, and let me hear all about the trouble at the Manse."

And, nestling happily at dear brother Phil's side, Susie told all about the dreadful night, and how Con—brave, bold Con—had come to warn and save, "so that I—I wouldn't burn up. And I believe that; don't you, brother Phil?"

"Yes, I believe it, Susie," was the answer.

"Oh, you ought to have seen him, brother Phil!" continued Susie, her voice faltering at the remembrance. "Dennis pulled him in the Manse, all pale and bleeding and scarcely able to speak; and his clothes were nearly torn off by the dogs, and—and everybody scolding and blaming and raging at him. Oh, it makes me cry to think of it! And Kathie—Kathie is Aunt Aline's new kitchen maid, brother Phil, and the nicest, dearest girl you ever saw,—Kathie said she knew that if Uncle Greg locked Con up he'd go crazy and burst his head against the wall, like her Uncle Jim. And it just broke my heart to think of that, brother Phil." Again Susie's voice quavered very close to a sob.

"Yes, I understand, Susie. So you and Kathie let Con out?"

"*She* did," went on Susie. "But I made her. I coaxed her to do it, brother Phil. Oh, was it wrong, brother Phil, when

everybody was so hard, so cruel to him?"

"No, Susie: you did what you thought was right and kind, even though,—” (Brother Phil hesitated. He could not tell Susie how glad he would have been just now to find Con safe within his reach.) “So don’t worry any more about it. And you or Kathie can’t say where poor Con went?”

“No,” answered Susie. “Kathie says she just pushed him out into the mist. He has gone—nobody knows where, and will never, never come back.” Susie was sobbing outright now. “We will never see poor Con again, brother Phil,—never again!”

And when brother Phil thought of the hunted boy fleeing over the wild ways of Misty Mountain, he felt with a sinking heart that perhaps Susie was right.

XVII.—BACK TO MISTY MOUNTAIN

SUSIE's brother could only soothe the sorrowing little girl in his own tender, cheery way, and promise her he would try to find her lost friend. Not even to little Susie could he tell how strong was this purpose,—what new reason he had for his interest in the homeless, outcast boy.

"You must pray, Susie," he said gently,—“pray to the good God, to our Blessed Mother to guide me; for, if Father Tim can spare me, I am off to-morrow morning to find your Mountain Con.”

"Oh, if you *could*, brother Phil!" said Susie, clasping her little hands. "Kathie said he would hide and starve and fight like a wild-cat before he would be caught again. But he wouldn't hide from *you*. He knows you would be good to him."

"Yes, he knows that, Susie," answered her brother, wondering at the mysterious Providence that had made him the one,

the only friend that outcast Con had ever known. "So pray, little girl, that the good angels will guide me in my search; for it won't be an easy one."

It was only to good old Father Tim that the young priest told the full story of all he had heard and learned on this bewildering day. His old friend listened with breathless interest, all his doubts vanishing into convictions that the finger of God was here.

"There is a fight before us, lad, said Father Tim, his eyes flashing into Irish fire,—“a fight to down the villain that has done this work. Did you hear aught of him?"

"Yes," answered Father Phil, who had made some cautious inquiries at the little post office in Riverdale. "Arthur Nesbitt is abroad. He spends most of his time in London and Paris. He has an income from his aunt and will inherit all that she has."

"Not if that boy steps out of the picture," said Father Tim, nodding. "Go look for him, lad. I'm on my feet again—thank God!—and don't need you. Go find that boy and bring him here. What is to be done then I don't know. It is never

wise to look too far into God's guiding. Bring the boy here, and He will show us what we are to do next."

And so it was that two days later Father Phil found himself once more in the familiar ways of Misty Mountain, in a search for his little "pal". It must be a cautious, guarded search; for as yet he had no direct proof of the boy's identity; and to set this strange story of evil-doing afloat might do incalculable harm. But in his own mind there was no doubt: the picture of Con's dead father had filled all the broken gaps in Wilmot Elkins' story,—had spoken to him almost as if it had life. There would be denial, dispute, contention,—legal fight perhaps, as Father Tim had said; but he would not as yet look to that: he must first find the lost, hunted, desperate boy, and then stand up for him as best he could.

So, giving only as excuse for his return the mission work that he was in truth doing, in his way, through these shepherdless mountains, Father Phil stopped for a brief visit at the Manse. Uncle Greg was still in a "hot Scotch" fury at the remembrance of the attack on his home, and gave his nephew full details, punctuated

with profanity, which Aunt Aline gently reproved.

"Brother dear, you forget Phil is a clergyman now!"

"No, I don't Madam,—I don't! Clergyman or not, I've got to blow out when I talk of this business,—blow out or burst. Coming to burn my house, poison my dogs, cut my wires to keep off all help! Caught them in the act, sir,—caught them in the act, loaded down with oil and turpentine to start the blaze!"

"It was well you were warned," said Father Phil, quietly.

"It was, sir,—it was!" continued the old gentleman, hotly. "Not that I altogether believe that young devil came to warn us, but the men caught him and scared him into giving the thing away. A villainous bunch, the whole of them, young and old! But we've cleared them off Misty Mountain forever. Got three of them behind bars, where, if there is any law in the land, I'll keep them for a good twenty years. Arson, murder; for they wouldn't have stopped at killing us in our beds, I know." And Uncle Greg burst forth again into a tirade of words more forcible than polite.

"And the boy," interrupted his nephew,—"the boy they tell me got away."

"He did, sir,—he did; how, only the old Nick knows; broke out of a locked and barred room, and was gone before day. It was witch work,—*devil* work, as the servants say." (Father Phil found it hard to restrain a smile.) "They tell me that old hag in the mountain had taught him more than mortal boy should know. Not that I believe any such nonsense, of course; but how he got out of that room, with every lock and bolt turned, I can't see."

"And you made no search for him?"

"No, sir, I haven't," answered Uncle Greg, testily. "After all, the boy had warned us,—warned us, he said, for little Susie's sake."

"And I believe he did, brother," put in Aunt Aline, eagerly.

"I *don't*, Madam!" roared Uncle Greg, flaming up into fresh fury. "I don't believe there was any good in the whole lot. But I caught the three worst of them; and the older villain fell down with a stroke of some kind when he heard it, and is dying in the log cabin now."

"In the log cabin?" echoed Father Phil, startled,—“your log cabin?”

"Yes; why not, sir?" asked Uncle Greg, who would not have been caught "softening" for the world. "We couldn't let him die like a dog in the hole on the mountain where he was hiding. Dennis and Jerry found him there yesterday. The old woman's caterwauling led them to the spot; and there they found them both, old man and wife, without food or fire, in a hole of a place you couldn't stand upright in. The log cabin was the nearest shelter, and I told the men to put them there. The doctor says he can't last another night. So *he* is done for. As for the boy, I'll bother no more with him. You might as well hunt a wild-cat, the men say. He'll never be seen on Misty Mountain again. Let him go where he will."

And Uncle Greg stalked away to his stables, while Aunt Aline fell to talking about Susie and her nervous breakdown; and Father Phil had to give his cheering account of the gay doings at "Lil's grandmother's," and how rosy and happy his little sister was growing under that good old lady's tender care.

"It was a hard time on the poor little darling!" said Aunt Aline, tremulously.

"What with the fright and fear and excitement of it, I'm shaken up myself; and now to have that wretched old man dying in all his wickedness at our door! I'm so nervous I can't sleep at night, Phil. Of course he doesn't belong to your Church, and I don't suppose he would listen to you; but I'd feel better if you would say a good word or so to him, Phil."

"Just what I was going to propose myself, Auntie dear! Now that Uncle Greg is out of the way, I'll start off to the log cabin at once."

Early as it was in the year, old Winter's sceptre was broken in the rugged ways of Misty Mountain; his icy reign was over in the sun-kissed heights that faced the south. The snow was gone, save where it hung in fading wreaths high up on the rocky ridges, or lingered in sheltered hollows that the sunbeams did not reach. Hardy shrubs laden with "bird" berries, pines feathering into new growth, tangles of the same "Christmas greens" that Con had brought to him generously, hedged Father Phil's path to-day. Soft twitterings came from the dwarf trees through which Con had peered in at the Christmas altar: some daring little birds were already

building their nests. Soon Misty Mountain would be a springtime paradise, through which the hunted boy could find his way like any other wild thing of the wood,—happy, reckless, unafraid. It would be hard to find Mountain Con in the gladness and glory of the Spring.

The heavy door of the log cabin stood a little ajar. Father Phil pushed it open hesitatingly. His little Christmas shrine made a desolate picture indeed to-day. But in the stone chimney-place that belonged to its far past a log fire was burning. Before it, on a pallet made by pitying, even if reluctant, hands, was stretched the huge, helpless form of the old mountain outlaw, Uncle Bill, his half-bared breast heaving with stertorous breathing, his lips twitching, his eyes fixed in a glassy, unseeing stare.

"Take it away!" he gasped, with a curse, to poor old Mother Moll, who was holding a spoonful of broth to his lips. "Wanter choke me, do ye, ye old witch hag?" And he lifted a shaking fist and tried to strike at the trembling old woman.

"Look here, old man!" Father Phil stepped forward in stern rebuke. "None of that now! Don't you know that you are

dying?" he went on, feeling it was not the place or time to mince his words,—“that in a little while you will stand before the judgment seat of your God and Maker to answer for all the crimes of your life? And you would die cursing, striking like this! Ask God for mercy while you may.”

Uncle Bill gasped speechlessly. Not in all his seventy years of wicked life had so clear and strong and fearless a tone challenged his evil-doing. It seemed to pierce into the dull, sodden depths of his unawakened soul.

“Who air you?” he whispered hoarsely.

“I am a priest,” answered Father Phil in a gentler tone,—“a minister of God. I come to you in His name. It is not too late to turn to Him, my poor friend,—to beg His mercy!”

“Listen to the gentleman,” pleaded poor old Mother Moll,—“listen to him, Bill! He is the kind that can lay spirits, witches, devils, Bill. It’s the lad that’s in his mind, sir,” she said, turning her dim eyes to Father Phil,—“the lad that he nigh beat to death a bit ago. He thinks he killed him, sir, and it’s his spirit that’s turned agin him and the boys, and brought all this bad luck on us. There, there!”

soothed poor Mother Moll, as the old man began, to gasp and mutter. "The mad fit's coming on him agin. He thinks he is talking to Con."

"I see ye!" panted Uncle Bill, his staring eyes fixed on vacancy. "I see ye, ye young devil! Ye got the best of me,—ye got the best of Uncle Bill. Ye brought me bad luck from fust to last. What I took ye for I don't know. It was the five hundred dollars the man gave me to keep ye till he came,—five hundred dollars down, and then he would give me more. He wouldn't give no name. There was something behind it all, I knew. And it's ten years I've had ye, ye young whelp; ten years I've given ye bit and sup; ten years—"

There was a step behind Father Phil. Some one entered the log cabin quietly. It was old Dr. John Murphy, who was taking Dr. Grayson's practice during his absence,—good old Dr. John, who was known as friend and helper to sinner and saint alike for twenty miles around. A man of God surely!

"Father Doane!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I beg your pardon! I did not know you were here."

"Don't go, Doctor!" Father Phil laid a detaining hold on the old gentleman's arm. "This is not a confession you are interrupting. But this old man is telling strange things, that it would be well for another witness to hear—about—about—the boy he has had with him for so long."

"Mountain Con!" exclaimed the old Doctor, with interest. "I always said that fine young chap did not belong to those rascals at the Roost. What is it, Gryce?" The friendly hand the old Doctor laid on Uncle Bill's clammy brow seemed to clear the dulled brain. "You were telling us about Con. Give it to us straight, Gryce. Where, when, how did you get the boy? For he isn't yours we know."

"No," gasped Uncle Bill, striving for clear speech. "He ain't oun. The man give him to me at Rykus Ridge ten years ago. It's cut on my gunstock the time—" The words broke into a hoarse cry.

"O Lordy, Lordy, he's a going,—my poor Bill is going!" wailed Mother Moll.

And then priest and Doctor bent over the struggling form to give what help and comfort they could. Perhaps, as Father Phil hoped, his whispered words into the old sinner's failing ear awoke some

response in his dulled soul; perhaps some blessing lingered in the log cabin from the Midnight Mass that had sanctified it so short a time ago.

Father Phil did all he could for this "black sheep" with a kindness that poor old Mother Moll never forgot; and when all was over, and the old mountain outlaw lay in a peace his wild life had never known, the old woman told this good friend all that she knew of Con,—the fine noble babe that had been put in her empty mother's arms ten years ago. She brought Father Phil the old gunstock, and together they made out the date cut there: October 16, 19—.

"I gave him the little lace-edged slip and the neck chain, and the bit of money I could spare," sobbed the old woman; "and then I told him to go and find you, that would be a friend to him. But, after all this, he will never dare show himself near Misty Mountain again. He is gone, God knows where, sir."

"Never mind!" said Father Phil, cheerily. "I'm off to find him, if possible. And the boy that you took so long ago will make up to you, I'm sure, for all the sorrow and trouble of the past."

XVIII.—THE WILD BIRD'S FLIGHT.

WITH Uncle Bill's dying word, and Mother Moll's living witness, removing any shadowy doubts that might still have lingered in his mind, Father Phil started on his search for Con,—for Charles Owen Nesbitt, the old Madam's grandson and heir; for the child that, ten years ago, Wilmot Elkins, by his own acknowledgment, had taken at Arthur Nesbitt's word from the burning wreck, to rob of name, home, and heritage.

Father Phil's heart kindling with righteous indignation at the cruel wrong, with glowing eagerness to restore his little pal to home and friends, he began a task that at first seemed almost hopeless. For Misty Mountain was but the edge of a mighty ridge that stretched in jagged, rocky heights for miles,—pathless, inaccessible, save for the scattered cabins of trappers, and one or two rude, uninhabited settle-

ments that were scarcely deserving of the name.

A boy like Con could wander in these wilds for months, find his way to some distant State, where, without name or friends, he might never be traced, and would live and die unknown. But Father Phil's heart was in his task. God was guiding him, he felt, and he would not fail. Meanwhile he could do mission work, sorely needed in those wild ways, where church and priest were almost unknown. So, hiring a sturdy little mare used to mountain climbing, he filled saddlebags with all that was needed for his journey, and set out on his quest.

"You'd best take the old trail as far as it goes," advised Dr. John Murphy, to whom Father Phil had given some hints of his purpose. "It strikes one or two settlements yet, and you might hear of the lad there. Meanwhile I myself will set a few watchers out nearer home. The thing is not to scare the lad off further by letting him know he is being hunted down. He has had such tough luck all his life, poor chap, that he will think it is after him still."

And, indeed, Con's "tough luck"

seemed to be following him still; for Father Phil took the winding way of the old trail, questioning in vain at shack and cabin. The dull-eyed dwellers there had seen nothing of a blue-eyed, yellow-haired boy, who, the pleasant-voiced stranger suggested, had perhaps stopped to ask for shelter or food.

"Were he one of them ar Buzzards in the Roost?" asked one day a sharp-faced youngster, who seemed a bit keener than the rest.

"Yes," answered Father Phil, eagerly "Have you seen him? Here's a silver dollar to tell me when and where. I am very anxious to find him."

"Naw," said the boy, "I ain't seen him. I don't know nothing 'bout him; and I wouldn't tell you for no *hundred* dollars if I did."

And that this was the spirit of Misty Mountain Father Phil realized more and more as he went on his rugged way. For one so young, strong, and active, it was a pleasant way enough,—climbing wild heights where every glimpse was a picture no artist could paint; where his path led through wind-tossed pines, and by waterfalls foaming down the rocks in all the

glad freedom of coming spring. Sometimes night found him on a lonely stretch where there was no shelter, and he had to camp out as he had learned to do in his student days, tethering his sturdy little Jenny where she could find tender cropping of vines and shoots. After making a simple meal on the bread, cheese, and bottle of milk which he bought at the mountain cabins, and had ready in his saddlebags for such emergencies, he spent wonderful nights of prayer and sweet rest under the stars.

But usually the best that cabin and shack could give was cheerfully offered to this pleasant-voiced stranger. Several times he stopped on his way to say Mass in humble Catholic homes, where the priest came only at long intervals, and was welcomed rapturously by young and old. But in none of these places could he hear aught of Mountain Con. He would have turned back, feeling he was wasting time and effort in the search, but for the encouraging letters that reached him at various stopping places from old Father Tim.

"Keep on, my lad!" wrote his old friend. "It's mission work you're doing,

if nothing else; and mission work that is sadly needed up in those lone mountains. You've got the leave to give all the help there you can."

And, knowing how that help was indeed needed, Father Phil kept on his way, bearing blessing and comfort as he went.

In the meantime where had the "wild bird," as old Mother Moll called Con, flown? It had at first been a broken, helpless flight, of which the half-conscious boy retained only dull remembrance. For even Mountain Con's rude strength had given way; the boy flung by rough hands into the gypsy wagon had "give out" indeed, and could stand "agin things no more." Only the wild-wood creature's fear of recapture had sustained him so long. But he was dulled to fear and pain at last. Jolting over rude ways in the gypsy wagon, it would have gone hard with Con if the little brown-faced Carita had not been at his side, trembling with superstitious dread of what might happen to her own if she left this friendless boy to die. It was Carita who really fought for Con, when the men of the overladen wagons would have thrown out this

unwelcome stranger by the roadside at the noonday rest. It was Carita who bound his fevered head with wet, cooling kerchiefs as they jolted again on their way; it was Carita who, when they reached their camping place at sunset, brewed the potion (as she had been taught by her mother who understood herbs) that made Con sink into the restful sleep that was to bring back strength and health to him.

How long he lived in the gypsy wagon and under the little gypsy mother's care, Con never exactly knew; he was content to lie on the rough blanket that served as pallet, and jolt along over the rough mountain roads, and play with brown-faced Tony, whom the little mother left in the boy's care at the stops on the road, while she cooked and washed for the men. But that they were taking their way into wild depths unknown even to the bold hunters of Misty Mountain, Con began to see. The tall peaks around which the trail wound were higher and rougher than any Con had seen before, the mountain passes deeper and darker, the springs by which the wagons rested clearer and sweeter in their flow.

"It is the gypsy 'patteran,'" Carita

told him. "We go by ways that no one else can find, by marks that no one else can see."

"Where are we going?" asked Con, whose wits were beginning to work again.

"To the Gypsy Glen," answered Carita, who often drove the wagon while Peppo looked after the horses and dogs that straggled in long line behind it. Like all simple, tender-hearted women, she felt that the boy she had saved belonged, in a way, to her; and she talked to him as freely as if he were one of her black-browed tribe. "Every ten years, when the trees bud, the gypsies meet there to choose their king," Carita explained.

"King?" echoed Con, who had gathered some few facts about his country from the "boys'" talk around the smoky fireside of the Roost. "Didn't think we had any kings over here: jest sheriffs and jedges and—and presidents."

"The gypsies have kings," continued Carita; "and they rule the tribes far to the sunset and down the 'patterans' that lead to the great waters, and far up into the lands of snow. It is a great thing, my Conde" (for so she had softened her protégé's name), "to be a gypsy king."

Perhaps," (her voice sank to a lower tone) "it will be Peppo—this year—unless—unless they hear I am not real Romany, but Spanish-Indian born; and, true wife as I am to Peppo, I can not forget that once I was the child of God, though I can be so no more."

"The child of God!" Memories of the kind Mister of the Mountain and all that he had told him wakened in Con's mind at the words. He had a Father in heaven, that good friend had said,—a Father who was God.

"But it is too late to think now," said Carita, with a light sigh; "though when Tony was born and I feared I would die, I prayed again. I vowed to Santa Maria that if I and the child lived, I would have the blessed water poured on him that would wash away the sin."

"The sin?" repeated Con, who knew a little less than Carita.

"Ah, yes!" went on Carita, as the wagon turned into a narrow dell where the way was carpeted thick with pine needles from the trees on the cliffs above. The wheels turned noiselessly; the setting sun filled the pass before them with golden light. The men had galloped ahead to find a

camping place for the night; and Carita took the clamoring Tony in her mother arms, while she talked on. "Great sin is on the gypsy race, from father to son. So Peppo's grandmother told me when I first came to the tents, nearly four summers ago. Very old is Peppo's grandmother,—more than one hundred years; but her eyes still burn like fire in her wrinkled face, and she can tell all things that are past, all things that are to come. 'Little fool,' she said, when Peppo brought me, shy and fluttering like a newly-caught bird, to her tent, 'to leave your people and your God for a race accursed!' A chill fell upon my heart at the words. 'What is it she means,' I asked Peppo, as we passed out into the sunlight.—'Old granny tales,' he laughed, kissing me as we went off to dance to Pietro's guitar. But before Tony was born and I sat with the old woman in the tent and learned to make baskets, she told me all,—all the sin that was to fall on my child: how the Romanies had been rich and great in the old countries in the long ago, with many horses and great tents, with hangings of red and gold, and camels on which they crossed the deserts and went from land

to land. But you have heard of the Christmas night when the good Lord was born on earth a little child."

"Yes," said Con, with breathless interest. "I have heard all that,—about the stable and the manger, and the angels singing in the skies, and the shepherds watching beneath the stars."

"It was the eve of that holy night," went on Carita, "and the tents of the Romanies (or gypsies as they call us now) stood in the valley below the hill slope of Bethlehem. All the inns were full; but in the tents there was room, and soft carpets to rest upon, and hangings of silk and gold. For the men were proud and strong, and the women wore rings in their ears and about their ankles; and they had come up from the great river of the South to buy and sell at the vast gathering that had been called by the King of the Jews. And as the sun went down, Santa Maria, the Blessed Mary, came over the hillside, with San José, looking for a place to rest. From door to door they had gone, and there was no room for them; and they were tired with long journeying, and the night was coming on. But the tents of the Romanies stood open

to the sunset, and the women were laughing and singing within; and San José and the Blessed Mary, who could find no shelter, stopped and asked if they might stay with them to-night—"

"And the gypsies turned them away," burst forth Con, indignantly; "and they had to go to the stable and the manger, where it was all bare and cold."

"Yes," rejoined Carita; "and Peppo's grandmother says for that hard-hearted sin, the judgment fell upon the race. They must wander without home or country,—wander until the end of the world. Often have they tried to rest, Peppo's grandmother told me (with her bright eyes burning,) to build houses and plant trees and gardens, but they who do it grow sick and die. And the child of gypsy blood, wherever they strive to hold it, breaks loose from school and farmhouse, for the mountains and the hills. So it must be until the end of the world. Still it is a glad life the gypsy leads, my Conde,—glad and free."

"I wouldn't like it," answered Con, bluntly.

"Eh?" said the little gypsy mother, startled. "And why not?"

"I want to be something else," said Con, his thoughts turning back to the Mister of the Mountain. "I'd like to go to school and read books and learn things. I'd like to live in a house with pictures on the walls and frilly things at the windows, and everything nice like it was at the Manse. But I can't never go nigh there again. I've got to hit out for myself now,—far away as I can get."

"Then stay with us, Conde!" pleaded Carita, eagerly. "If Peppo is made king, we will have money, and our gypsy pot will boil full of all good things; and—we will be great among the tribes from East to West. And you will have your dog to yourself again, and a horse all your own, and—a fine jacket and boots with silver spurs, even as if you were my own brother. For you have no home, no father, no one of your blood or kin. Be a gypsy with us, Conde. Let me stain your white skin brown, so that the others may not know you are a stranger among us, and forget all that is past."

XIX.—THE GYPSY GLEN

"I WILL think of it," said Con to the kind gypsy woman. "Mother Moll always said we should think for a day and a night before saying yes or no. If she had done so, she would never have married Uncle Bill."

"Nor I, perhaps, Peppo," said Carita, with a little sigh. "But he gave me no time to think even for a minute. Ah! Santa Maria, only in dreams at night the old life comes back to me,—all that I left for him: the altar, the red light always shining like a star, old Padre Antonio with his kind voice and his hands outstretched to bless. Tony is named for him, though Peppo must never know that. Poor little Tony, on whom I have brought the gypsy sin!" And Carita's dark eyes filled with tears as she drew the brown-faced baby closer to her breast.

But Peppo's call sounded in the distance.

In a moment she shook away the tears, and, putting Tony hurriedly in Con's arms, caught up the slackened reins. "Pancho, Lara, lazy ones, your master is calling! Get on,—get on!" And the wagon jolted on around the bend of the high cliffs into the meeting place of these wandering tribes—the Gypsy Glen. All about it rose the mountains, steep, rugged, dark with pine forest, save where a few loftier peaks shot up high and sharp like watch-towers, crested and capped with snow. Leaping down one of the rocky cliffs was a waterfall, that filled the air with its music, and widened into a little stream that went rippling and winding down the Glen. Full a dozen tents were already up, with their fires burning, and horses, mules, dogs tethered around.

Peppo had secured his camping place, and was already busy driving stakes to make his claim. Men were shouting to their beasts and calling cheerily to each other; women chattering, children crying, dogs barking,—it was a busy scene into which Carita's wagon jolted. She sprang from it gaily, as blithe a gypsy as the rest, and joined a crowd of younger women gathered about the van where a black-

eyed peddler was showing his wares,—gay kerchiefs and skirts and ribbons, cheap watches, brooches, and strings of amber and coral.

Con was left with Tony while Carita bargained for the red silk waist, the mock jewels that would befit the dignity of a gypsy queen. Other vans there were to tempt the silver from her beaded purse; for this meeting brought peddlers of all kinds to fleece their gypsy brethren, and Peppo was generous to his pretty, black-eyed wife. Carita bought soft little booties and a tasselled cap for Tony; cakes made of nuts and honey, after old recipes the Romany tribes had brought across the sea, dates and figs pounded into pastes.

Con's charge was a bit restless and fretful; so he lifted him from the wagon and let him roll on the soft grass under the shelter of the pines, until at last he fell asleep in the gathering dusk. And now lights began to glimmer, and fires to glow, and gypsy pots to boil, while unctuous odors of stews and broths filled the air. Con, whose appetite was sharpening daily, began to think of Carita's talk this evening. It did not seem so bad to be a gypsy after all. It would mean gay free-

dom, such as he had never known; for until now he had not strayed very far from the smoky fireside of the Roost and Uncle Bill's fierce rule. It would mean food and fire and light, and poor Con had often starved and shivered in the darkness. It would mean living in cheery company, instead of fighting a cold, unfriendly world alone. The gypsy camp looked very bright in the deepening shadows, as, their beasts fed, and their tents staked, the men flung themselves on the new grass, playing cards, throwing dice, or touching their mandolins and guitars into tinkling music.

And he would have Dick for his own again,—faithful old Dick, who always pulled on Peppo's stout leash whenever Con came near; Dick who, when he was sometimes loosed at the evening rest, came bounding and leaping to Carita's wagon to lick his young master's outstretched hand. With his returning strength, Con had been considering the possibility of cutting Dick's leash some quiet night, and making off with him into the darkness. But his old daring had not come back to him yet, and he knew he was in strange wilds, through which he could

not find his way. With its boiling pots, its gleaming lights, its laughter and music, the gypsy camp looked very pleasant to the homeless boy to-night, as, stretched out by Tony's side in its cheerful shelter, he thought of the dark, pathless, lonely wilds above. And then Carita came back to find her two nurslings, and bring her Conde a generous share of dainties she had bought in the vans.

"The boys and girls are dancing," she said, "and the Arab Achor has set up his Tent of Wonders against the cliffs. He has a bird that talks, and a dog that plays cards. And they are rolling balls and shooting at a mark. Take these three dimes, Conde, and go and be gay with the rest."

It was an invitation no live boy could resist. Con, whose ragged clothes had been replaced by a khaki suit of Peppo's, much shrunk by repeated washings, but still gay with green braid and brass buttons, pulled his brimless hat over his yellow hair and set out to be a gypsy to-night "with the rest." Seldom in his hard, rough young life had he been "let in" at any of the pleasuring of Misty Mountain. Not even when the circus had made its

way through the old trail, and spread its tents on Farmer Dennis' three-acre lot, had he been allowed anything more than a peep-hole at the wonders within. Now, with three dimes in his grasp, he felt rich indeed. He was a little shy of these strangers at first, and stood apart, watching the dancing and the ball rolling. But the shooting he understood. Nat had taught him to hit a bird on the wing three years ago.

"It's ten cents to win or lose a shot," the black-eyed man was calling.

The bull's-eye flaming out bright and clear against the darkness seemed an easy mark indeed for Mountain Con. And he took up the clean new rifle, unlike anything in the old Roost, and shot one, two, three, four, five times. The gypsies pressed around, shouting and laughing. They had never seen a boy shoot like this before.

"But five shots was the limit," the black-eyed man declared angrily, as he put the five dimes in the winner's hand; and, with this new wealth added to his store, Con felt like a fairy prince indeed.

"But he is a rogue, that Gaspar," said a girl who had been watching at Con's

side. "He should let you shoot more."

"It is enough," laughed Con. "Now I will try the rolling balls." Again his quick eye and steady hand won.

"Come and dance now," said the girl, who was about his own age, and had long black hair tied with red ribbons, and wore a necklace of gold beads.

"No," replied Con. "I can shoot and roll balls, but I never danced in my life."

"Then it is as I thought," and the girl's dark eyes flashed. "You are no gypsy. What are you doing here?"

"I fell sick on the road up in the mountain," answered Con; "and Carita, Peppo's wife, would not leave me to die. She put me in the wagon and brought me here."

"Then you are white, you are Christian, you are stranger!" exclaimed the girl, breathlessly.

"To-night," said Con; "but I may be brown-skinned and a gypsy to-morrow. I do not know yet."

"To-morrow?" repeated his new friend. "To-morrow you may be a gypsy? Oh, how—why—I—do not understand!"

"Carita wants me," answered Con. "I will have my own horse and my own dog again. Peppo has Dick here now on his

leash. And I have broken loose from everybody and everything else. I haven't any place to go, and it's nice here. I think I would like to stay always, but I am not quite sure yet. I must think longer before I say yes or no."

"I would not think," said the girl, eagerly. "If I were a white-faced boy like you, I would say *no, no, no!*"

"You would?" Con stared in amazement at the breathless young speaker. "But you are a gypsy yourself."

"Yes, yes, and I can not change. But if I were like you, with the white blood, the white heart, the white skin, I would hold to them always—forever, forever!" repeated Zila, passionately. "You can have houses, gardens with roses in them, birds singing in cages at the windows. Ah! I have often seen all these things as our wagon passed down the roads, with the tins clinking and the dogs following us, and the men hurrying us on to the camping place for the night. It is always hurrying on and on with the gypsies. I would like to have a home with walls that are strong and sure, and to go to school and to church. I went to church one morning—" Zila paused as if the

experience had been a most thrilling one.

"Was it a Christmas church?" asked Con, recalling the log cabin.

They had seated themselves on a mossy ridge beside the little stream.

"No," answered Zila. "The May-flowers were in bloom. Our camp was down in a hollow, and the women came there to have their fortunes told and buy charms and spells. My grandmother had sent me into the woods to look for old snake skins and young tortoises that she could sell to bring luck. But I could find none, and kept on and on by strange paths I did not know, picking May blossoms as I went, and listening to the birds singing on the treetops. Then I heard other singing louder than that of the birds; and I stopped, hiding in a thorn bush to hear and see. And down the path near me came a line of little boys and girls all dressed in white, with their hands full of flowers. They had a white banner larger than the red and yellow flag that flew from my grandmother's tent; and, though the sun was shining, some of the boys carried lighted candles. And there was a tall man behind, with a lace gown over a long, black dress; and all were

singing together as they came through the trees. I stole along after them to see where they were going; and I found that it was to a church around the bend of the road; and—and then I forgot all about the snake skins and tortoises, and followed in with all the rest."

"And it was all green and woodsy-like," put in Con, as the narrator stopped; "and there was a great table filled with lights and flowers."

"Yes," said Zila, "and a lady was standing there,—not a real lady, but a beautiful statue dressed in blue and white, with a gold crown. And all the singing children laid their flowers at her feet and knelt down; and crowds of other people came into the church, and I hid in a dark corner where no one saw me, and heard it all,—the singing and the praying and the organ music. And after they had gone, and there was nobody to see, I stole up to the beautiful lady and put my May blossoms there, too, with all the rest."

"And you didn't find the snake skins?" asked Con, sympathetically.

"No," answered Zila. "Grandmother was angry and struck me with her cane, but I didn't care. For the next day we

broke camp, and I've never been to church since. I was glad I went that once, so I can remember,—remember it forever."

Then a shrill old voice from a neighboring tent called:

"Zila!"

"Grandmother!" she said, starting up and hurrying off.

Grandmother,—grandmother! The old gypsy witch wife! Grandmother who sold snake skins and tortoises to foolish women! Even poor old Mother Moll was wiser, better than that.

The vans were closing up for the night, the men quarrelling over their cards by the dying fires.

"Where Peppo is I do not know," said Carita, as Con came up to the wagon. "They have made him drunk, I fear, the rascals! And something is wrong with Tony,—my Tony! That old witch Huldah has cast the evil eye upon him, I know. I heard her hiss like a snake as we passed her tent."

Tony ill, Peppo drinking, old Huldah casting her wicked spells! The Gypsy Glen was losing something of its charm for Con. Better the white skin and the white soul, as Zila had said.

XX.—CON “THINKS”

TONY is sick?” asked Con.

“Yes, yes!” answered Carita. “Feel his head, how hot it is; and he will not lie still. It is old Huldah’s evil eye, I know. She wants her son, the black Carlo, to be king. They are making Peppo drink, so he will talk foolishness and all will think he has no brains. And me they hate, for that I am not Romany born. Old Huldah is a witch woman, as everyone knows. She hates all who are Christian born; and the old women in the tents say that she put the spell on Zila’s mother that killed her when the girl was born.”

“Zila?” repeated Con,—“the girl with the black hair and red ribbons? I was talking to—her—to-night.”

“Then talk no more,” said Carita, sharply. “Though her dead mother was a Christian, she has witch ways, too. Lie down in the wagon and go to sleep. I

must watch here for Peppo; and Tony will not rest."

And, crooning to the fretful child in her arms, Carita paced up and down in the starlight, all her gypsy gladness and gayety gone. Con lay down in the wagon, but not to sleep. He was thinking of all he had heard and seen of gypsy life. The camp was very quiet now; the voice of the waterfall its only music, the stars shining down upon the shaded glen its only light. Now and then the cry of a child or the bark of a dog broke the silence for a moment, then all was still again. It had been a gay evening,—the gayest Mountain Con had ever-known. Everything had been open to him,—the peddlers' vans, the shooting match, the ball-rolling; he now had silver jingling in his pockets that would buy him more gayety tomorrow. Ah, it was a glad, free life that of the gypsy, as Carita had said!

And yet—yet—something in Con's "white soul" recoiled from it all. To wander forever; to have no home, not even the smoky old fireside of Buzzard Roost; to follow the "patteran" over wild mountain heights, without rest! But he would have his horse and dog, his

gay jacket, his boots with clinking spurs; the gypsy pot would boil with rich broth for him; there would be warmth and rude shelter at night, glad freedom all the day. He would never have to plough or dig or work with saw and hammer and chisel; never have to bend over desk or be shut up in store. He could live like the wild things of the wood, free from all thought and care. And then Con remembered Zila, and all she had said to him; he remembered the "Mister" of the Mountain and the log cabin and the Christmas night; he remembered Susie, with her eyes like violets and her golden hair.

It was not often that Con found "thinking" so bewildering that he could not sleep. And the cakes, the honey nuts, all the strange sweets he had eaten that evening had made him very thirsty. He felt he must steal down in the darkness to the water and get a drink. Very softly (he had learned the hunter's trick of soft creeping) Con edged his way about the camp. He must not rouse the dogs or wake the sleepers to angry alarm. He had almost reached the waterfall that leaped in crystal coolness down the rocks, when he caught the sound of voices on

the other side,—voices that mingled, half heard, with the music of the water that filled the night. Peppo! Con paused anxiously as he recognized the tone of Carita's lord and master rising in drunken boast above the rest. Peppo, whose little wife was watching for him even now, with the sick Tony in her arms! Peppo, who was perhaps losing all chance of his kingship by foolish talk and more foolish drinking!

Con felt he must guide Peppo back to what he called home, if he could. But Peppo sober was quick-tempered enough, and would brook no meddling; with Peppo drunk, Con felt he must be cautious indeed. He stepped forward a little, so that he could see around the projecting rocks. Though it was now past midnight, half a dozen men were stretched out on the new grass, gambling under the flaring light of a huge pine torch thrust in a fissure of the cliff above. Con recognized Gaspar of the shooting tent, the swarthy owner of the rolling balls, and several others who were conducting the business end of the camp,—all keen-eyed and clear-headed at their game. Only Peppo's voice was thick and his eyes dull. He was

losing to these sharpers, it was plain.

Thinking of the little wife waiting for Peppo in the darkness, Con stood wondering anxiously how he could coax him home without rousing his wrath.

"There!" Carita's lord and master was saying angrily. "Robbers that you are, you have taken all my money! I will play no more."

"Pouf, pouf, you scare easy!" answered the hook-nosed Gaspar. "Luck changes, man! Try again."

"I tell you my money is gone. Ten, twelve dollars—I do not know how much I have lost to you to-night. And my woman is waiting for me. She has a tongue that can talk sharp and fast."

"Bah!" laughed the swarthy ball-player. "The bold Peppo must have changed indeed when he fears a woman's tongue. And who cares for money? I'll play you, man, for one of those fine dogs you have in your string." (Now indeed the listener's heart leaped.) "In another hour you will have all your losing back and more. Luck is a shy bird; it never perches long on one shoulder. Last night I gamed until my pockets were emptied; then I staked my box of balls, and won straight running

until my pockets were full. Come, I'll pay you for a dog. I saw your pack as you came into the Glen this evening. It's ten dollars against that tawny wolf-hound of yours that holds his head like a dog king."

"Pooh!" said Peppo, brightening up somewhat at the bargaining. "Ten dollars for that dog! With a few more pounds of flesh on him, any fancier would give me five times ten for Dick."

"And cry out on you for a gypsy dog-stealer!" was the mocking rejoinder. "Better fight shy of the fanciers with that dog. They've got him on their look-out list, you may be sure, and are watching for the chap that brings him in. He ain't no 'pick-up,' as anybody with eyes can see. But I am asking no questions. I'll make it fifteen dollars for him, though it's a risky business, I know."

"Fifteen dollars, and the chance to win fifty more. Fifteen dollars, and stick to the game like a man."

"Done!" said Peppo, his dull eyes kindling. "It's Dick against fifteen dollars, and I'll play again."

And then—then Con's feet, that had seemed glued to the earth, suddenly found wings. He was off into the darkness in a

wild flight that knew no pause. Dick, his friend, his comrade, almost his other self! Peppo was staking, selling, gaming for Dick, who would soon be lost to him forever; for that Peppo would never win against these sharpers, Con well knew. But for Peppo, for himself; even for Carita, and for Tony, just now Con had no thought or care. He must save Dick; he must keep him out of cruel hands that would starve, abuse, maltreat him. They must fly together, where or how Con did not stop to think. Only the old mountain instinct guided his bounding steps, and hushed their swift, light tread. Noiselessly he sped on, past tents, wagons, sleepers; keeping cautiously in the shadow until he reached the sheltered nook where Peppo had corralled his beasts,—the five horses, the seven dogs that their owner had led so proudly into the Glen a few hours ago. Tired with their long day's journey over the mountain, full-fed from the gypsy pots and kettles, all were sleeping too heavily to catch the light footfall that scarcely bent the springing grass.

Dick was stretched out a bit apart from the rest, his tawny head and white breast plainly visible in the dim starlight.

Con caught his jaw in the old silencing grip; and Dick started up at the familiar touch, mute, breathless, with eyes up-lifted, ears pricked, limbs quivering, as he recognized his master's hand.

"Dead, Dick!" whispered Con. "Play dead, while I cut your leash. Dead, old boy,—dead!"

It was one of the tricks the boys had taught their puppy playmates on the Roost; and at the word Dick fell over stiff, stark, and silent. Con had in his pocket the knife Peppo had loaned him to cut kindling for Carita's fire. It took but a moment for its sharp edge to sever the leathern leash, and Dick was free once more.

"Come now!" said Con, his hushing grip upon the dog's jaw. "Easy, Dick,—quiet and easy, old fellow! We're off together again."

And boy and dog bounded away noiselessly into the darkness, whither neither of them thought or cared. The starlight shimmered faintly through the trees; the wild mountain heights rose rough and pathless above them. Without food, shelter, guide, the two friends sped joyously along, free, fearless, and together again.

It was close to the break of day when

Peppo came staggering back to his tent and wagons, to find Carita still watching, wide-eyed and anxious, over her fretting child. He had a sharp welcome, for the little mother's nerves were sorely strained. Never in all his twenty months of wandering life had Baby Tony been ill before.

"Brute that thou art," she cried passionately, as her lord appeared, "to leave me all night with my dying child!"

"Dying!" echoed Peppo, sobered somewhat at the word. "Tony dying! What are you talking about, fool of a woman?"

"Look at him!" said Carita, thrusting the child forward so his father could see. "His head is burning; his eyes will not shut. He has been tossing in my arms all night. And you—you dog of a father, without heart or soul—have been gaming, drinking, while your child dies! Why did I ever bring him to this accursed place,—my Tony, my Tony, my baby, my little boy!" And Carita's voice rose into a piteous wail.

"Hush, then,—hush!" said Peppo, who, with all his faults, had a fierce love for his wife and child. "You have given him something—some of that sweet stuff from the vans."

"I have given him nothing, nothing!" said Carita, stirred into new fury. "Do you think I am a fool, without head, without heart like yourself? It is the old witch woman that has put the 'spite spell' on him. Always has she hated me since I came to the tents. Did I not hear her hiss on us as we drove into the Glen this evening?"

"And if she has I will throttle the life out of her for it!" said Peppo, fiercely. "Some one has put the black luck upon us, I know. All my 'money have I lost this evening, and my best dog."

"All your money and your best dog!" Carita gasped. "Is it Conde's Dick you mean?"

"Ayel!" replied Peppo, sullenly. "Here comes Gaspar for him now. I must unleash and give him up."

And while Carita sat quite dumb with dismay at this new disaster, the black-eyed ball-tosser came up to Peppo's tent to secure the prize for which he would not wait even until the break of day; for the wolf-hound he had just won was worth ten times all he had staked on him, the crafty Gaspar well knew.

"I must be off early," he said. "There

is a fair down the valley where I can make more than here. I will take my dog now."

"Rogue, villain, rascal, you are robbing us!" burst forth Carita, passionately; while Peppo led the way back of the wagon where his dogs were tied.

And then in a moment shouts, cries, fierce tumult roused the camp. Men and women came starting out half-wakened to, find Peppo and Gaspar cursing as they clenched in hot fury. For the dog was gone—where, Peppo swore in the teeth of his wrathful antagonist he did not know.

But the quick-witted Carita snatched back the canvas of her wagon, and guessed all. For Con was gone, too, all his thinking over,—gone from the gypsy camp and the gypsy life forever,—gone with his dog.

XXI.—THROUGH THE DARK
· TO THE DAWN

CARITA sank back trembling, as turmoil spread through the gypsy camp.

“Liar—Thief!—Robber!—Rascal!” rose the angry cries.

That the dog had been stolen or hidden by Peppo to escape payment of his losings the other gamesters stoutly swore. No one had thought of Con as yet. It would be a short shrift with him if he were caught making off with Dick, Carita well knew. She must give the white-faced boy a chance,—hide his absence until day. While the crowd gathered, she put the crying Tony back into the covered wagon, and was ready to face Peppo when he broke away from his antagonists to question her.

“The dog? Where is the wolf-hound? You have been sitting up with the child all night, you say, so you must have seen and heard.”

"What do I know—what do I care for your dogs when my child is dying," she cried out. "Listen to him,—listen to him! Brute of a father that you are, with no thought but for your dogs! Hitch the horses to the wagon and let me go,—go with Conde and the child beyond reach of the old witch hag's spell,—the spell that will kill my Tony if we stay in this place accursed any longer. Quick, quick, I say, or the child will be dead before the dawn!"

Tony's cry sounded sharply from the wagon, where the half-muddled Peppo thought he was held as usual in Conde's arms.

"Fool of a woman! Where will you go?" asked Peppo, with rough anxiety, for this wild fury of his little wife stirred the natural father love in his heart.

"To the hills," she said breathlessly, "where the 'patleran' turns around the spring by which we stopped to drink at Monday. Quick, put Lara in the traces! he will be enough. You can stay with the horses, the men, the tents. I must fly to save my child."

She was loosening the big-boned Lara as she spoke, while Tony's cry rang out

sharp and shrill from the wagon. Peppo never dreamed he was lying on the blanket untended, while his little mother pushed harness, strap and buckle feverishly into place. It was only a moment's work, for the gypsy gearing was simple. Lara was soon ready; and Carita sprang into the wagon, took the reins, and, heedless of the wondering, jabbering crowd that had gathered around, drove off into the night.

"She is mad," explained Peppo,—“mad with fear for her child! Some poison breath has touched him, If harm comes to him I will throttle that old witch hag Huldah till the dry bones in her throat crack like dead sticks. She is putting the curse on me to-night, that her black-eyed Carlo may be king. But I will stand,—stand for Peppo, the son of Elkanah, against all. And since the hound is gone, where I know not, I will give two others in his place, to show that I am neither rogue nor rascal.”

And with this disappointing bargain the sharper, who had cheated the befuddled Peppo from start to finish, had to be content.

Meanwhile Carita had flung the loos-

ened reins about her wrist and let Lara take his way unguided; while she caught the fretting Tony to her breast, sobbing out her heart in a passion of mother love and fear. But she had saved Conde,—saved the white-faced boy, who, if the wrathful Peppo had guessed the truth, would have been hunted down with scant mercy. Conde was gone with his dog, and would be miles away in these pathless wilds before his absence could be discovered.

Slowly the cautious Lara kept on his way, following the "patteran" tracked by a score or more of his mates, up into the hills still towering black against the starlight; while Carita sobbed and crooned by turns over her wailing child. Dark despair was in the poor little mother's heart; never in all her gay, thoughtless life had she faced such loneliness as this. In her wanderings before, Peppo had always been at her side,—bold, black-eyed Peppo, who had lured her from the old life to share his gypsy fortune. Memories of that life came pressing upon her heartbreak now: the little adobe home in the valley, that had seemed so narrow and dull when the gypsy lover

came singing to his guitar under her window,—the lover of whom the good Padre Antonio had forbidden her even to think; then the wild flight like that of an uncaged bird to the nearby town, where before the Justice of the Peace, in a dim law office, some unhallowed rite, which she did not understand, had made her Peppo's wife; and then freedom and gladness and gayety such as her prisoned young life in the old adobe home had never known.

But it had all been wrong, wicked, sinful, as she felt with a sharp pang of remorse to-night. She had not asked the good God's blessing on her marriage; she had not sought it for her child; and now Tony was dying,—he was being taken from her as she deserved. Light little butterfly that she was, Carita's fluttering wings were crushed with a weight of woe they could not bear. Even the gleam of the stars that lit her lonely way had a reproachful light. They seemed to shine down upon her with the pale radiance of the tapers on Padre Antonio's altar,—the altar she would never see again.

Suddenly her sobbing ceased; her quick

ear had caught a sound that made her heart leap,—a light, swift footfall. Some one was following her! She caught up the heavy-handed whip, prepared to lay it on the intruder boldly, when a young voice called sharply through the breaking darkness:

“Carita, wife of Peppo, wait for me,—wait,—wait! My breath is gone climbing the hills after you. Wait,—wait!”

“Who are you?” called Carita, drawing up her horse; for the girlish tone was reassuring.

“Zila,” was the answer, as the slight figure came panting through the shadows, and, without further question, leaped into the wagon at its owner’s side. “I can run no more. Let me rest before I speak.”

“Keep away from the child!” said Carita, sharply. “You are following me for no good. I am flying from you and yours now.”

“I know,” said Zila; “and it is for that I have come. My grandmother has done it no harm. It is all lies, foolishness. Come back to the tents in the Glen, and do not fear a poor old woman whose wits are half gone, and who herself cries like a child for her food and

drink. I live in her tent and I must know how it is."

"She hissed like a snake as we passed her at sunset," said Carita hotly. "The child has been ill ever since she cast the evil eye upon him."

"Her eyes can see no longer," replied Zila. "She is blind. She would curse me if I told. She fears they will leave her with the Christians to die. But when I heard you were mad with fright for the child to-night, I followed you to say that you can come back without fear; my grandmother neither saw nor heard you this evening."

"Is this the truth?" asked Carita, breathlessly. "I have heard that she can blight with a look, a touch."

"Lies!" answered Zila scornfully,—
"all gypsy lies! But they have brought silver to her hand, meat to her pot, and so she lets the fools shake and fear. She can do your child no harm. Turn back to the tents."

"I dare not," said Carita, though her voice trembled. "And you were good to follow me through the darkness like this to lift the weight from my heart. But there is another curse upon my Tony that you do not know."

"What?" asked Zila, curiously. "Did the moonlight fall upon him barred by a crossed tree? A black crow flap wings over him as he slept? Did you lift him over running water with uncovered head?"

"None of these things" said Carita, stirred into confidence by the sympathy of her listener. "You would not understand, for I am not like the other gypsies. Once I was a Christian. I went to the church. I knelt at the altar."

"With the singing boys and the girls in white?" asked Zila. "And did you bring flowers to the beautiful Lady?"

"Yes, yes!" answered Carita, with a little choke in her throat as she recalled the May procession of her childhood. "Zila, Zila, how did you know?"

And then Zila told of the adventure she had recounted to Con; and soon both of these little half gypsies, children alike in heart and soul, were chattering in friendly mood—when big Lara suddenly made a stumble in the darkness and went down on both knees. The wagon lurched forward on a broken trace, and then jolted down hopelessly. Luckily its inmates were young and lithe enough to spring to the ground without hurt or harm.

Carita burst into wild lament. Here was tragedy indeed. High up on the pathless mountain, with a dying child in her arms, and no help within reach! What she would have done without the friendly little gypsy girl who had followed her we can not say. Zila had learned "first aid" for such emergencies that no books could teach. She freed the fallen Lara from his entangling gearing, pulled him up to his feet, and righted the wagon as best she could.

But Lara's knees were shaking. With trace and axle broken they could make their way no farther up these rough heights without stronger and more skilful help. Happily the day was now breaking. The pale light of the early dawn showed them their surroundings. A level stretch dusky with pines opened to their right. Through it came the soft murmur of running waters.

"It is the Crystal Spring," said Zila. "My grandmother made me fill six bottles with the water as we passed yesterday. It keeps away death, she said. Come, we will sit here until day, and then you can bathe the child and give him the water to drink that will make him well and strong again."

And, taking command of the situation which seemed too much for the poor little gypsy mother, Zila led Carita into the shelter of the pines, already grey with the morning twilight, that in the heights beyond was blushing with the rose of dawn.

It had been a wild plunge into unknown darkness for Con and Dick. They had no "patteran" to guide their flight up the black, pathless heights that formed above the gypsy camp. Together, they sped on over rock and ridge and gully, through thickets of thorn and tangles of vine; wading the streams, leaping the chasms that the pale starlight showed in their way. Just where he was going Con did not think or care until he was miles away from those who would have taken his four-footed comrade from him forever. Then he sank down upon a mossy stretch, and, with his head pillowed upon Dick's willing back, slept as the hunted creatures of the wood can sleep after glad escape like his—softly and happily until the break of day.

When he and Dick awoke, they breakfasted (somewhat sparingly, we must confess) on the cakes and sweets that still

remained in Con's pockets from the last night's feasting, and began to look about on the rough heights which they had reached in the darkness,—heights now flushed with all the glory and beauty of the dawn. Con had learned wariness by hard teaching, and he was no dullard. With the gypsies gathering from far and near in the Glen below, he knew that these rose-lit ways were not safe, either for him or Dick. Already a search party, headed by the wrathful Peppo or Gaspar, might be looking for them. And, as these were not the familiar ways of Misty Mountain, how far he had gone Con could not tell.

So it was with watchful eye and stealthy tread that he kept on his journey to safety; while Dick, thinking doubtless that, as of yore, they were hunting some shy game that must not be startled, moved noiselessly at his young master's side.

Then suddenly through the thicket of pines by which they were creeping came sounds that made boy and dog pause breathless and alert,—the sobs of a woman, the cry of a child!

XXII.—A MORNING JOURNEY

SOFTLY parting the feathery branches, Con peered in upon the scene they framed. Carita and Tony,—Tony, whose piteous cry was rending the poor little mother's heart. Tony, sick, dying perhaps from some hurt that had befallen him in the Gypsy Glen. Tony, the little charge and playmate whom Con had learned to love. So stirred was he at the sight that he forgot all peril to himself and burst through the pine thicket to Carita's side.

"Conde!" she called out in delight and surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he asked breathlessly. "Tony! What is wrong with Tony,—*my* Tony?"

"The curse is upon him!" sobbed Carita. "I tried to fly from it, but it was too late. My baby is dying,—dying, Conde! And it was to save you, too, that I came. Peppo thought you were with Tony in the wagon."

"Peppo?" echoed Conde. "Is he here?"

"No, no!" answered Carita; and then in a few words she explained her flight from the camp, and the breakdown on the mountain-side. "Zila has gone to some cabins that we saw down in the hollow, for help to mend the traces, so that we can go back to the Glen. Tony must not die up here, away from his father and his father's people. What would I do with him, stiff and cold in my arms, alone,—alone?" And she burst into cries and sobs at the thought.

"You shall not be alone," said Con, eagerly. "I will stay with you and Tony. I will go back with you to the Glen. He shall not die. Give him to me. I am younger, stronger than you, Carita. I will hug him close, as Mother Moll made me hug Nat once when he had the mountain ague; and he will draw my life and strength. Come Tony,—come!"

Tony's black eyes blinked open at this comrade call, and he stretched up his arms to be caught in a bearish hug to Con's breast.

Then Zila came hurrying through the brightening dawn to greet cheerily her friend of the previous night. Now Con

could mend the traces with strips of bark cut from a neighboring tree; for her search in the cabins had been fruitless. She had found only one old woman, too crippled to walk; all the rest—twenty of them—had gone before break of day (so the old woman had told her) to Corbett's Cut, where there would be great doings, whether circus or camp meeting Zila could not quite understand. "Mass," the old woman had called it.

"*Mass?*" echoed Carita, with a start. "Surely—surely not that!"

"It was what she said," declared Zila; "and that it was two years since there had been a Mass in these mountains, and she would have been glad to crawl the ten miles on her hands and knees if she could only go."

"It must be Mass, then," said Carita, breathlessly. "So I have heard my poor old grandmother talk when she was crippled long ago. Mass—up in these mountains! But how, where? There is no priest, no church."

"I do not know," answered Zila. "But she said the people were flocking to Corbett's Cut for miles around,—men, women and children, all. They were even taking

the babies that could not walk. That was foolish, I thought; but she said so. What it all meant I did not understand, do you?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" said Carita, tremulously. "There is a priest somewhere near,—a priest saying Mass, preaching, blessing, baptizing,—baptizing as I vowed long ago my Tony should be baptized. It would wash the sin from him; it would lift the curse. O my baby,—my baby! If I could take him with the others,—if I could take Tony, too! And I will,—I will!" she cried in sudden resolve. "Mend the trace, the wagon, if you can, Conde," she added, snatching Tony from his arms. "If you can not, we will walk,—crawl, as the old woman said, ten, twenty miles. It is the good God, the Blessed Mother to whom I prayed, that have had pity on me. Living or dying, my Tony shall have the blessed water poured on him; he shall be baptized,—he shall be baptized!"

And, stirred by Carita's appeal, Con hurried off to do his best for the broken wagon. But, even with Zila's skilful help, all his efforts were vain. Axle as well as trace were shattered hopelessly. Lara was limping painfully on a lame

leg, that would make travel over these mountains most precarious, even if it were possible.

"Then we must walk!" cried Carita, in a fever of mother love and fear. "What are ten miles to such blessing for Tony! And I vowed it when he was born. God is punishing that broken vow by taking him from me. The blessed water shall be poured upon him: he will live,— my baby will live! Did not the other women and children walk from their cabins? We, too, will go to Corbett's Cut. The old woman to whom Zila talked will show us the way."

But when they stopped at the hut in the hollow, the old crone, hobbling to the door, with the beads in her hand, eyed them suspiciously.

"You do be gypsies from the Glen below," she said. "They'll want no jigging and junketing at Corbett's Cut. You'd best keep off."

"No, no!" answered Carita. "For I was a Christian once, old mother; and my child is sick, I fear to death. I go to the priest to have the blessed water poured on him. In God's name show us the way."

"Whether ye be telling lies or truth to

me I do not know, but what ye ask in His name I must give," was the still doubting answer. "Keep down the rocks to the right of ye, and then follow the creek. It leads to Corbett's Cut. But if ye're looking to doing fortune-telling or witch work there, it will be worse for ye, I warn ye. The devil daren't show horns or hoofs to-day nigh Corbett's Cut."

And, nodding her snowy head in evident distrust of these questioners, the speaker turned back into her cabin and hurriedly closed and bolted the door. She had told them enough; only a slight clue was needed to guide such wanderers; and they kept on their way, along the rocks to the right, until the voice of the creek below gave them further guidance. It was only a low voice at first, murmuring through a cleft in the mountains, but growing fuller and deeper as they followed its call. Con and Dick led the way, parting the tangles of thorn-bush and vines, that the others might pass through. What this strange journey meant neither boy nor dog knew. But if, as Carita said, it was to bring life and strength to Tony, Con was only too willing to go at once wherever she willed.

"It is foolishness!" declared Zila, as she came up beside Con. "Carita is mad with fear for the child, as we all can see. When she has a dozen, like the wife of Gaspar, she will have more sense."

"But the water may be good for Tony, as she says," replied Con, thoughtfully. "There are many things, Zila, that the gypsies do not know."

"Nor you either," she returned sharply.

"That is true," said Con. "If I could find the 'Mister' who came to the mountain last Christmas, and told me so much that I had never heard before, he would teach me again."

"Who was he?" asked Zila, curiously.

"I do not know," answered Con. "I had his name written on paper, but I lost it when I was sick. I can never find him now. He was tall and straight,—tall and straight and young as Peppo; but his eyes were not black and fierce; they were blue and kind. And when he stood in the log cabin, with the light shining upon him, all dressed in white and gold—"

"In white and gold!" interrupted Zila, breathlessly. "Was he a king, then?"

"I do not know," answered Con again.

"It all seemed as if I was not awake? but dreaming,—the lights, the flowers, the singing, the people kneeling with their heads bowed. Then Irish Dennis came and turned me out. I'll never see anything so fine again, I know."

The voice of the creek had grown deeper, louder; the cleft of the mountains wider. The young travellers could now see the waters swirling and foaming through the gorge below, as they forced their way from its wild darkness into freedom and light. Then the rugged banks sank into softer slopes beside the broadening stream, that swept on in shining guidance through the parting mountain. Con paused suddenly. His quick ear had caught a sound, startling on these mountain wilds: singing,—full-voiced singing such as he had heard in the log cabin on Christmas night; singing that woke the echoes of cliff and ridge. And as he stood listening a cry came from behind him, and poor Carita sank down helplessly on the ground.

"I can go no farther!" she panted.
"My head is burning, my breath is gone."

"Get her some water!" said Zila quickly. "The long walk with that heavy

child in her arms has taken away all her strength."

Con filled his cap from the creek. Zila bathed the poor little mother's head, held water to her lips; but Carita could only lean back white and faint against the rock behind her.

"We are almost there," said Con, striving to urge her on. "Listen! You can hear the people singing!"

Louder came the voices now, blending in a chorus of deep-toned praise. It was music such as the poor little gypsy had not heard for years. She tried to rise at its call, but sank down again helplessly into Zila's arms.

"I can not walk!" she moaned. "All the way here I have been cold and weak; but I thought to keep on for Tony's sake, that the blessed water might be poured on him by the priest, as I had vowed,—that he might be a child of God. But I can go no farther with him."

"And all will be over if we wait," said Con; "for the people have stopped singing now. Perhaps they are moving off."

For a moment he hesitated. Hunted young outlaw that he was, he knew not

what danger he might face among these singing people. Then he boldly flung away all thought of fear.

"Let Zila stay with you, Carita," he said. "Give Tony to me. I will take him to the Cut and have the blessed water poured on him as you wish."

"Oh, if you will, Conde,—if you will!" pleaded Carita, despairingly. "Take Tony to the priest, ask him to baptize him,—lift the curse and sin from my baby, as he can. Take him, Conde, and I will thank you all my life."

And Con took the fretting Tony from his mother; and, with the baby arms clasping his neck, the baby head nestling on his shoulder, he and Dick started off again, along the bank of the creek, swelling into loud-voiced triumph at his side as it guided him on nearer, nearer, nearer to the singers,—the singers whose hymn of praise now came clearly through the morning gladness:

Holy God, we praise Thy name!

Lord of all, we bow before Thee!

All on earth Thy sceptre claim,

All in heav'n above adore Thee;

Infinite Thy vast domain,

Everlasting is Thy reign.

Con turned the bend of the guiding

creek, and stood transfixed. Men, women and children, in numbers he could not count, filled the slopes of the Cut between the parted mountains, crowding around an altar that seemed to flame in the morning sunrise with glory and light that dazzled his wondering eyes. And standing there, in shining robes like those of Christmas night, was—was—oh, Con felt he was dreaming! This could not be true!

XXIII.—CORBETT'S CUT

FOR long weeks Father Phil had been journeying through the mountains, bearing God's blessing as he went; traversing wilds where the good seed had not been scattered for years; where the lost sheep had grown deaf to their Master's call; where souls slept dull and heavy in the darkness, or hungered sorrowing for the Bread of Life. Wherever there was need or shelter or welcome for him, he had stopped, saying Mass, preaching, instructing, marrying, baptizing, with such zeal and fervor that the fame of this young missionary had gone forth into the wilderness; and at the news of his coming, men and women gathered from miles around. But, though he had questioned far and near, he could learn nothing of Con. Inquiries, advertisements, even the help of the police in the cities nearest to Misty Mountain, had all been in vain

Father Phil was at last reluctantly forced to conclude that Con was either dead or lost to him beyond discovery. And, as these mountain wilds were not the apportioned field of his life work; it was time for him to go home and abandon his search.

He was holding what he intended to be the last "station" at good Mike Brannigan's farmhouse in the valley when a letter reached him in a roundabout way from Father Tim.

"I will be glad to see you back, Phil; for I'm not so strong as I was before my last spell of rheumatism," wrote his old friend. "And, though it may have been a Will-o'-the-wisp you've been chasing, you've done God's holy work along your way. There are some people of my own up there that I have not seen or heard of for years,—a first cousin of my mother's, that went into sheep raising. Corbett is his name,—Terence Corbett. If not too much trouble you might look them up if you are any place near, and pass them a friendly word."

"Corbett?" said Father Phil's host, when his reverend guest questioned him. "Old Terence Corbett? Sure yes, Father,

I know him well; and it's a fine place he has when ye once get there. Corbett's Cut they calls it. But it's a good twenty-five miles from here, with the backbone of two mountains betwixt us. But ye'd be welcome as the flowers of spring; for ould Terry has a lot of poor craythurs tending and shearing for him that never see a priest from year to year."

Twenty-five miles, and over the backbone of two mountains! Father Phil had learned by hard experience what that meant, and he had intended to start home to-night. Still—still, Father Tim's letter seemed to sound his Master's call into farther wilds. He would go to Corbett's Cut. Young Pat Brannigan went as his guide, for he could never have found his way alone.

The "backbone" was all that a mountain's backbone could be. They were a night and a day crossing steep, rugged heights, ribbed with granite, hollowed into gorge and chasm, veined with snow-fed streams. It was the wildest road Father Phil had struck yet, and he wondered that mortal man should choose so rude a fastness for an abiding place.

"There do be softer ways beyond the

Cut, Father," young Pat explained. "But the gypsies are camping in the Glen this spring: it is safer, I think, to keep to the rocks."

And, knowing the lawless ways of gypsies, Father Phil felt that this young guide was right. The sun was far to the west when they reached the Cut, a narrow valley between great, wooded heights that sheltered it alike from sun and storm. A swift, clear stream, that seemed to have cleft this passageway through the mountains, swept on by widening banks, where the old sheep farmer's flocks grazed in placid security.

The broad, low house, with its far-reaching folds and outbuildings, was a picture of pastoral prosperity; and Father Phil's welcome was all that, even after this long, rude journey, he could have asked. Old Terence and his wife fell on their knees, and, in the exuberance of their joy and gratitude, kissed their visitor's hand.

"We weren't looking for any such blessing as this; but now that ye've come, Father, we'll spread the good word far and near. Andy, Darby, Tom,—boys, all of ye be off! Never mind the dumb bastes

to-night: scatter all of ye with the blessed news. The priest is here to say the Holy Mass. Let every man, woman and child be at Corbett's Cut by break of day. There's not room enough in the house, Father; but we'll raise an altar out under God's own blue sky, where everybody can hear and see."

There was little rest that night about Corbett's Cut, as the blessed news was borne far and near, even to the widening ends of the valley, where, as of old, "the shepherds watched their flocks." Sturdy young hands raised the altar on a grassy knoll, beyond the house; and, though these simple folks had no such treasures as Aunt Aline, Mrs. Corbett brought out spotless Irish linen, and Irish lace woven by her maiden hands in the old country, candles made from her own beeswax; while the boys and girls were off before dawn, gathering mountain laurel and wild cherry blossoms,—all the first fragrant offerings of early spring.

As he stood before this bower of bloom in the morning sunrise, Father Phil's thoughts went back to the Midnight Mass in the log cabin, to the blue-eyed boy who had decked that winter shrine with

Christmas green; and his kind heart ached, even in this holy hour, for that little "pal" whom he had sought for so vainly,—the lost heir to whom he had tried to do justice,—the friendless, homeless, hunted boy, whom he felt he would never see again. "God guide and protect him, since I can not!" was the young priest's sorrowful prayer, as he bowed before the mountain altar in the gladness of the sunrise. "Be a Father to poor fatherless Con!"

The Mass was over. The hymn of praise with which Father Phil always concluded his mission services had died into a silence, broken here and there by eager whispering:

"He'll be blessing and baptizing now. Take up your beads to him, Norah, and the cross that Dan brought you last Christmas."

"There's Molly Maxwell taking up her six-weeks babe for the baptizing; and ould Norah Finley the two grandchildren that never saw the priest afore in all their life."

"Sure and it's a great day, the Lord be praised! Did ye see ould O'Flaherty on his knees this morning,—him that has

been the heartbreak of his poor wife this ten years and more. And it's the lovely face his riverence has, and he little more than a lad himself!"

"Aye, but he's the grand, knowledgeable man, for all that, as any one can see and hear. Will he be staying long, d'ye think, Mrs. Mulligan?"

"No: he's off again to-night, young Matt Corbett was telling me. Ye couldn't expect the likes of him to be wasting his time with us. Not that there isn't sore need of him, the Lord knows! It's little of His holy word and law we get up here. Though I'm doing my best, it's hard to keep the boys and girls in God's ways. And now comes them haythen gypsies into the glen below, with their ball-spinning and fortune-telling to turn the children's heads. I told me own plain enough that if I caught any of thim straying off to the camp I'd make thim sorry for it—arraah, what are ye pushing in here with that dirty big dog for?" broke out this sturdy old Christian mother, as a strong young arm pressed her unceremoniously aside in the midst of her whispered gossip.

"Let me by, I tell you,—let me by!"

panted the eager, breathless boy, who was making his way through the crowd, a child in his arms and a great wolf hound at his heels. "Don't scrouge Tony! He's sick. I want to take him to the Mister there,—my Mister!"

"The Mister!" echoed the good woman, wrathfully. "Your Mister! And is it to his riverince ye're giving that name, ye unmannerly young villyan? Ye must be half-witted or worse. Mister indeed,—the priest of God standing afore the altar! The Lord forgive ye!"

"It's a gypsy, he is, mother!" giggled the girl at her side. "Can't you tell it by his dress?"

"A gypsy?" gasped the mother. "The Lord save us! One of thim vagabonds from the Glen below? What is the like of him doing here, for the love of Heaven? Stand back ye thief of the world! Stand back, with yer dirty beast! Ye've no right here!"

"Let me by, I tell you,—let me by!" panted the boy. "You shan't stop me. It's my Mister! I'm going to him to have the water poured on Tony here. It's my Mister, that talked to me upon the mountain, and said he'd take me away

with him. That is my Mister standing up there in that shining coat. I'm going to him. I'm going to be his brother, his little pal—"

"Pal, *brother!* Sure it's downright mad the craythur is!" rose the indignant murmur around the young speaker. "It's no good he is after. Here, Dan, Eddie, don't be letting this omadaun up to his riverince with a dog ready to ate us alive. Put thim out, lads!"

"Try it!" said Con, his eyes flashing with their old fire as two sturdy boys turned at their mother's call. "Just you try stopping me or putting me out! I—can't fight you with Tony in my arms, but I'll set my dog on any one that touches me."

"He will,—he will!" rose the alarmed cry. "Keep out of that dog's way, boys! Let the men bring a noose or chain to hold the beast while they drive this boy off."

And the hubbub spread through the crowd to the altar, where Father Phil was preparing to bless and baptize, as he had promised to do after the Mass.

"What is the trouble back there?" he asked of the tall young Mat Corbett,

who had been his acolyte and had gone into the crowd to hush the noise.

"It's a fool of a gypsy boy, Father, from the Glen. He has brought a child with him."

"To be baptized?" asked Father Phil.
"By all means!"

"I don't think he knows what he wants," said Matt. "But he is making a row there among the old women. Father has sent one of the men to put him out."

"With the child,—the unbaptized child? My dear boy, no, no, no!" said Father Phil, earnestly. "What are you thinking about? Quick, bring the boy back before he can take the child away! Gypsy or not, it is one of God's little ones that I am here to save and bless."

But there was no need for sturdy Matt's help: Con had forced his own way.

"Let me in,—let me in!" pleaded a young voice that made Father Phil's heart leap. "I'll set Dick on if you try to hold me back! Let me in to my Mister!"

And, flushed, panting, desperate, Tony held high in his arms to escape hurt in the pressing crowd, Dick stalking boldly behind him, a blue-eyed, yellow-haired boy pushed his way forward to the rustic altar.

"Mister,—my Mister!" he cried. "D'ye mind me? I'm Con,—Con of Misty Mountain; Con you were so good to last winter. Mister, I've found you—found you—found you at last!"

And the lost heir of the Nesbitts stumbled forward to Father Phil's feet.

XXIV.—A NEW LIFE

It was a wonderful day that followed for Con,—the happiest and most wonderful he had ever known. First, Tony was baptized. What that meant Con only dimly understood; but that it would bring his little black-eyed charge help and blessing, he was sure. Then having explained his coming to Father Phil, that good friend took everybody and everything in his kindly care. Many and various were the rumors circulating about Corbett's Cut as the mountain worshippers scattered. The most favored story was that Con had been stolen by the gypsies, and had fought his way to his friend, the priest, when he learned he was near.

After such a breakfast as Con had never tasted before, Father Phil's kind hosts furnished him with horses and wagon, that Con might take Tony back in safety to his little mother, who was watching

anxiously for his return. Father Phil had a long talk with Carita as they drove back along the winding road that led to the Gypsy Glen,—a talk to which Zila listened with breathless interest. Just how or why they did not understand, but they knew that Con was going out of their life and their world forever.

"I would like to go, too," said Zila, while Carita wept softly over the little "child of God" now sleeping happily in her arms. "Ever since I listened to the singing children, my heart has turned from the gypsy tent, the gypsy life. So I told Conde last night. But my grandmother is old and blind, and I can not leave her."

"When she dies you can come," said Con, as they stopped on the hill beyond the camp; for it would not have been wise for him to go farther. "But where you will find me I do not know."

And, to ease the sad parting, Father Phil put the address of Saint Cyprian's on a card and had Con leave it with these simple friends, should they want to hear from him. For the young priest knew that this poor, outlawed boy might have power and place they little guessed, and

might reward their kindness to him in the years to come. So, with words of hope and cheer, and blessings from Father Phil, Con bade his gypsy companions adieu, and went back with his "Mister" to Corbett's Cut, where the good woman of the house was ready to "mother" him, as the boy charge of his "riverince" should be mothered.

Bathed, brushed, dressed in a "decent" suit that belonged to her own Mike, the wild gypsy lad was transformed into a fitting companion for Father Phil's further journeying. And the old sheep farmer would not hear of the young missionary's return over the "backbone" of the mountain. He insisted on furnishing wagon and driver for easier route to the railroad, some thirty miles distant, where the old watchman at a lonely crossing flagged a passing train.

The travellers were soon speeding on in a way bewildering indeed to Mountain Con. It was to be a night journey; and, though he had been talking freely to Father Phil as they jolted over the mountains, a sudden silence fell upon him when they took the train. As it thundered off into the gathering darkness, a strange look came upon the

young face, into the widening eyes. Father Phil could see that the sturdy hand holding tight to Dick's collar was trembling. Con,—Con of Misty Mountain trembling!

"What is it, Con?" asked his good friend, kindly. "Do the cars make you ill, my boy?"

"No, Mister," was the answer, while the speaker's breath came short and quick. "It ain't that, I don't know why, but I'm scared like—like as if my bad dream was coming true."

"Your bad dream, Con?" questioned Father Phil.

"Yes," went on Con, panting. "I used to have it when I was a little chap, but I 'most forgot it,—a dream about a rushing and a reeling like this, and fire and smoke, and somebody catching me up out of it all in the darkness. But I'm wide awake now. This ain't no bad dream, is it, Mister?"

"No," answered Father Phil, his own voice trembling a little as he realized what Con was dimly remembering. "This is no bad dream: you're wide awake, Con, with a friend at your side, and nothing to fear, my boy,—nothing. Look around you! See! Nobody is afraid. Everybody is bright and happy."

And then a boy came along selling chocolate, and Father Phil bought a box. And the little girl in the seat beyond began to make friends with Dick, and her father said he was the finest dog he had ever seen. And altogether things became so cheery and pleasant that Con forgot his bad dream, and was his own bold self again. And when he turned into his berth that night, dead tired and sleepy, his last remembrance as he closed his eyes was the Mister's kind voice murmuring: "Go to sleep, my boy! There is nothing to fear, God bless you!"

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Breakfast had just been served in St. Cyprian's modest rectory when Father Phil walked in upon the pastor, with a sturdy boy at his side, a big wolf hound behind him.

"Well, here we are, Father Tim!" was his cheery greeting. "Here is your roving shepherd, and his lost lamb."

"Eh—what—what? What is it you say, lad?" Father Tim dropped his soft-boiled egg in a hopeless smash, as he started to his rheumatic feet. "Who is it you have with you, Phil?"

"The lost heir," answered Father Phil,

clapping his hand on Con's shoulder,—
“though he doesn't know himself by that name as yet. He is just now only Con, my little pal and brother,—Con of Misty Mountain, that God has given into our hands and care. Down on your knees, Con, and get Father Tim's blessing.”

Then Con and Dick, who were equally ignorant of the future this coming fore-casted for them, were committed to the care of Mrs. Farrell (Father Tim's cook and housekeeper), and had their breakfast in the sunny rectory kitchen; while Father Phil gave his old friend a detailed account of his wanderings and their ultimate success.

“There can be no doubt of the boy's identity,” he concluded. “Everything confirms it, even his dimly remembered terror at the night journey on the cars.”

“Yes, Phil,—yes: it's God's guidance from first to last, as even our dull eyes can see,” said the old priest. “And a fine, noble lad he is, even if he never comes to his own.”

“But he *shall* come to his own!” There was nothing dull in the younger priest's eyes, as they flashed with resolution. “He must have the rights to which he

was born,—name, home, family, fortune. He must have justice, as I promised; and as that means a legal fight, I am sure, I intend to put all the scattered proofs I have gathered in the hands of the best lawyer I can find, and let him go to work at once—this very day."

"You may be right,—you may be right, Phil." Father Tim rubbed his chin as was his fashion when in doubt or perplexity. "I am a simple old priest that never had much worldly wisdom; and the lawyers, poor men, have to make their living, as we know. But the saints have all been against lawsuiting when it can be helped, Phil. It brings on bitterness and scandals and heart-burnings. And since God has guided us this far so wonderfully, couldn't we trust Him a bit further, Phil? His ways are those of peace and love and mercy, lad. Can't you think of something better, wiser, holier than a fight?"

"No, I can't," was the answer. For Father Phil was only twenty-six, and had in his breast a soldier spirit that even cassocks can not altogether quell. "With that villain, Arthur Nesbitt, alive and ready to give the lie to all that we can say or prove!"

"I suppose he will," sighed Father Tim, sadly. "It would be only poor human nature without God's grace, Phil. Ah, well, well! It's a sinful world we're living in, and sometimes it's hard to see the way. It will do no harm to wait a bit, and look around us, and pray, Phil,—pray. I've seen many a dark way lightened and crooked way made straight by prayer. You have the lad safe and sound now, thanks be to God! Why not take him around a bit, show him the parks and the shops and the pictures,—all that he has never seen? You couldn't trust him by himself, wild young kiddy that he is; and the other boys would be making game of him for his innocence. You'd best give him a day or two, and show him the town."

And Father Phil, who had learned the simple wisdom of his old friend's guidance, agreed to give Con "a day or two" in this new world, where his little pal was a stranger indeed; for the wildest ways of Misty Mountain had not been so bewildering to him as the busy streets, with their cars and motors and hurrying crowds. At first Con kept at his good friend's side in a dumb, dazed silence; but very soon he brightened into eager interest, and began

to wonder, to question, to enjoy. It was almost as if he had been transported into another planet. And Father Phil, who had not quite realized what a transition it was for Mountain Con, found a keen, almost boyish pleasure in being his guide through this unknown wonderland.

They went into great Gothic churches, where Con asked if the soaring pillars "grew" there; into public parks, where he wondered what had changed the statesmen and heroes "into stone." He had to be guided (who had never needed guidance in the wildest ways of Misty Mountain) through the perilous rush of cars and motors and bicycles; and rescued, almost at the peril of Father Phil's life, from an ambulance speeding with "right of way," which the staring young mountaineer blocked. Con, who had never seen a ship, stood in breathless wonder on the wharves while Father Phil showed him the great ocean steamers, the white-winged sailing vessels, all the crowd of smaller craft making ready to cross a world of waters to other lands he could not see. They rode out to the Zoo, where the young hunter of Misty Mountain stared doubtfully at his olden enemies behind bars,

and couldn't "see no sense in caging wild critters. They'll bust out some day. I'd bust out myself if they shut me up like that."

Many and various were the sights Con saw during those first few days in the great city,—always coming back at sunset for a quiet evening in the rectory at St. Cyprian, where Father Tim and Father Phil talked to him of other things more wonderful and beautiful still. Most wonderful of all, one evening there came a letter to Con himself. It was from Susie, who was back at St. Joseph's now,—Susie, to whom Father Phil had written of his finding Con at Corbett's Cut, and who sent a rejoicing letter to the dear Mountain Con, who could be her friend forever now that he was brother Phil's own boy. Then at night there were prayers sometimes in the dear old sanctuary of Saint Cyprian's, sometimes by his snowy little cot in Father Phil's room,—prayers which Con was learning to echo even if he did not as yet quite understand; for Father Tim's household was making a novena for guidance and help.

"Give me nine days' talk with Saint Joseph, Phil," said the old priest, simply:

"and then you can go ahead with your lawyers and make your fight."

Con learned a great deal during these nine days of waiting; for the "Mister" gave him much of his thought and time,—gently correcting the rude words and ways of the Roost and the Mountain, teaching him the little proprieties of manner and speech, which to the wild young outlaw of the past had been quite unknown. And Con, watching this big brother and pal of his with keen, loving eyes, proved an apt pupil, and was soon managing knife and fork and napkin like a gentleman born. Then as Mike Corbett's suit was of rather a tight cut for the stalwart Con, Father Phil took him up town one day and had him outfitted anew from cap to boots. With his shock of yellow hair trimmed into shape, in his stylish English tweeds, with a blue tie (that just matched his eyes) finishing the spotless linen at his throat, Con was as handsome a boy as any "big brother" could desire.

"He looks what he is—the Nesbitt son and heir," thought Father Phil, as they paused for a while on their homeward way through the park to watch the goldfish in the fountain. "Father Tim's novena is

up, and it is evidently time now to work as well as pray. I will see my father's old friend, Judge Verrell, and put the case in his hands to-morrow."

"Father Doane!" spoke a pleasant voice, and a lady passing by paused and stretched out her hand in cordial greeting. "You have forgotten me, I see; but I have not forgotten you. I am your friend Jack's cousin, Eunice Rayson."

"Forgotten you? Not at all!" was the warm answer. "My visit to you was in every way a memorable one. I wrote Jack a lengthy account of it. By the by, I had a delayed letter from him this morning. He is off to the seashore, he tells me."

The speaker paused as she saw the lady did not hear. With wide, startled, almost frightened eyes, she was staring at the boy beside him.

"I—I beg your pardon!" she said, recovering herself. "For a moment I was bewildered, Father Doane. The likeness is so—so astounding. The boy with you—for God's sake, who is he?"

"Ah, the fight is on!" Father Phil thought, and he flung out Con's colors fearlessly at the question.—"Ah, you recognize him, I see, Miss Rayson! This

is Charles Owen Nesbitt, the child of that boy in the picture,—Charles Owen Nesbitt, who is here to claim name and home.”

XXV.—REVELATIONS

"FATHER DOANE!" cried Miss Rayson. What are you saying? What do you mean?"

"Sit down here for a moment," replied Father Phil, motioning to a bench near the fountain, while Con turned to feed the goldfish with some "crackers" he had in his pocket. "The whole story will be out in a few days, so I may as well tell it, in friendly fashion, to you here and now. That boy is Charles Owen Nesbitt, falsely reported killed in a railroad wreck ten years ago, as you have doubtless heard."

"I know,—I know!" Miss Rayson was pale and trembling. "Oh, I have heard the story, grieved, agonized over it with my poor Madam. And you say—you say—please, Father Doane, what is it you say? Tell me all,—for God's sake, tell me all."

And then in brief, eloquent, indignant

words, Father Phil told his breathless listener Con's story, as bit by bit it had been revealed to him, until the whole truth stood written as if with the finger of God against the blackening cloud of guilt that had darkened this young life. And while his good friend talked, the yellow-haired boy, seated on the rim of the fountain feeding the gold-fish, was a confirmation of that truth no doubter could deny.

"O my dear Madam, my poor Madam!" Miss Rayson was fairly sobbing when the narrator finished. "Whether this will mean life or death to her, I do not know. She is so old and frail and broken-hearted, I fear for her,—I fear for her, Father Doane."

"Is this villain, this Arthur Nesbitt, so much to her, then?" asked Father Phil.

"Oh, no, no!" was the trembling answer. "There has been coolness, distrust, I can not say exactly what, between them for years. But in her remorse for the past, she feels somehow as if it were her fault,—that she is unjust, exacting, suspicious. 'It is my hard, evil old heart,' she says, 'that can not trust or love.' And so she is good and generous

to this nephew, allows him a handsome income, acknowledges him as her heir. He lives most of the time abroad; and, even without this cruel wrong to shame it, it is not a good life, Father Doane."

"I can well believe that," was the reply. "But perhaps this will make the revelation of his villainy less of a shock to his benefactress. He will make a fight, of course; but I shall be ready for it. I intend to put the boy's case in the hands of a good lawyer to-morrow, with the letters, the testimony witnesses, to prove his identity. Perhaps it will be well for you to prepare Madam Nesbitt, lest the disclosure come to her too suddenly, too rudely, in less kindly ways."

"Oh, yes, I must,—I must!" said the young lady. "What she will say, what she will do, I can not tell; for there is still a strong spirit in her feeble frame. She may be angry, doubting, defiant. She may take Arthur's side and defend him against this awful, cruel charge. But, O Father Doane" (Miss Rayson's eyes turned again to the unconscious Con feeding the goldfish), "if she could once see that boy, image as he is of her own dead son! If she could see that boy! I left her only

an hour ago seated before her own Charlie's picture in the library. She spends half her time there of late. It comforts her, she says, to forget the dark, sad years of their misunderstanding, their separation, and to remember him only as the beautiful, blue-eyed boy who was all her own. Father Doane" (the speaker rose in sudden resolve), "I believe every word of this story is true; and she must know it, believe it, too. Let us risk the shock. Let us trust to God, to nature, to the mother's instinct, the mother heart. Let her see that boy standing, living, breathing before his father's picture, and you will need no law or lawyer to prove his right to his father's name and home. You can tell the dreadful story afterward; you can bring your witnesses, show your proofs; but let the boy speak for himself first,—the boy of the picture, Father Doane. I know the poor old Madam's longing, fancies, prayers. I have a plan. I see a way to break this strange story gently, tenderly, I hope blessedly to her. Let me manage it all, Father Doane. Bring the boy to Oakwood this afternoon and trust the rest to me."

Father Phil hesitated. He was travel-

ling in strange ways when he had to deal with women, either old or young; and the thought of the shock his story would bring to the feeble, shaken, broken-hearted old mother appalled him. But Jack's cousin was wise and kind and clever, and held a daughter's place, as she had told him, in the old Madam's home. He would take her advice, he would bring the boy to Oakwood and trust to her. But first he felt Con must learn his own story, which as yet had not been revealed to him; he must hear something of the claim that Father Phil had determined to press without further delay. He had hesitated to bewilder his young protégé with uncertain prospects, but now it was time for him to know, to understand all. Con himself opened the subject. As Miss Rayson turned away, he joined Father Phil, his blue eyes lifted in perplexed question.

"You didn't tell her I was Mountain Con: you called me something else. Have I got another name, Mister?"

"Yes, you have another name, Con," was the answer. "Come sit down here on this bench under the trees, and let me tell you about it. C O N, the letters

on the little gold clasp that Mother Mol' took for your name, stand for Charles Owen Nesbitt, your real name, Con,—the name given to you by your father and mother."

"My father and mother?" echoed Con, with widening eyes. "Have I a father and a mother?"

"No, Con: they are both dead, my boy. They died when you were a baby little older than Tony. But they left you name, home, friends, a place in the world of which you have been cruelly robbed all these years. That bad dream of which you told me was not altogether a dream, Con. Wicked men took you off in the darkness from the smoking, burning train, and gave you to Uncle Bill and Mother Moll, so that they—these bad men—might keep the money and the home and the place that belonged to you, as your dead father's son; and Charles Owen Nesbitt grew up a poor, friendless boy, the Con of Misty Mountain."

"And that wasn't never my name?" broke in Con, breathlessly. "I wasn't never Uncle Bill's boy; I was—who did you say I was, Mister? Say it over again."

"Charles Owen Nesbitt," repeated

Father Phil. "That is your right name, Con. How I found all this out is a strange and wonderful story that I will tell you some other time. All that you need know now, is that you are Charles Owen Nesbitt, and that I am trying to put you back in your own home, your own place in life, where you will have everything that you have missed so sadly all these years, my poor boy!"

"I 'don't want nothing," burst forth Con, and there was a passionate sob in his tone. "I don't want to be put nowhere. I don't want to be no—no Charles Owen Nesbitt, Mister. I want just to stay with you and be Con, your Con, your little brother and pal, like you said up on the mountain long ago. Don't send me away Mister; don't put me back nowhere else. I don't want nothing—nothing but to stay—to stay with you. Just keep me and teach me and make me good, and I'll do anything you say. I'll wash the dishes and scrub the floors for Mrs. Farrell, and I'll sweep the church, and I'll tie up Dick so he won't scare nobody, and I'll sleep in the kitchen and won't ask to eat nothing but scraps, if you'll just keep me with you, Mister, and not send

me nowhere away. Because I love you, Mister; nobody was ever so good and kind to me before. Don't turn me into Charles Owen Nesbitt and send me away."

"Con, my dear, dear boy." Father Phil flung his arm about the shaking young form,—“you don't understand, Con. You will have a beautiful home, dear boy! I have seen it, Con; soft carpets, shining floors, flowers, pictures everywhere; and you will be rich and great."

"Don't want to be rich; don't care for no carpets or pictures or flowers." Con was trying desperately to steady his breaking voice. "Don't want nothing but to stay along with you, Mister, and be your Con."

"And you *shall* be." Father Phil's own voice broke at his little "pal's", outburst of devotion; "you shall always be my little friend, my brother, my own dear boy, Con. But you can be all this even as Charles Owen Nesbitt, your real self, Con. Let me tell you how."

And Father Phil proceeded to explain how the change in his young pal's fortune would only make life better, brighter, happier for them both. He pictured the

good that rich and great men do, the poor boys they can help, the old Mother Molls they can shelter and warm.

Con's eyes began to brighten, and his shaking voice to steady, as Father Phil talked to him; but there was no great cheer in his words as at last he agreed.

"I'll do whatever you say, Mister, long as you don't give me up and turn me off. I'd rather stay your Con, but I'll be Charles Owen Nesbitt if you say I must."

And so it was that, a few hours later, Father Phil found himself once more in Riverdale, where the quaint old homes, snow-wreathed at his last visit, now looked out into bowery stretches of springtime blooms; and the shouts of the tennis players echoed from the grassy courts of Lil's grandmother, filling the air with merry music. But in the beautiful grounds of Elmwood there was no sign of life: all was dead and still. As Father Phil looked at the blue-eyed boy beside him, thought of the glad change his coming might bring, he breathed a silent prayer that God would bless this saddened home and make all things right.

"This is your grandmother's home, Con," he said, pausing for a moment at

the ivy-grown gate. "It was your father's, it is yours."

But, though there was breathless wonder in the glance that swept over lawn and garden and mansion, Con only murmured: "Don't want it, rather stay at St. Cyprian's with you."

"But you must remember what I told you, Con. You are your father's son, and must take his name, his place. And the poor old grandmother has been grieving for years because you, the little baby her own boy left, was lost to her; killed, as she believed, in the burning car. You can take away the pain from her poor old breaking heart," continued Father Phil, who had his own doubts and fears about the coming interview, and felt he must prepare Con for it. "And you must try."

"Don't know nothing about grandmothers," said Con. "But I know how 'twas with Mother Moll when Uncle Bill hit her. I could always sort of chirk her up."

"O Con, Con, my poor, dear Mountain Con!" said Father Phil, hopelessly, as he recalled the past experience of Madam Nesbitt's grandson and heir. "May God

and His good angels direct you, for neither man nor woman can."

Then the two friends passed up the box-bordered path to the door, where Miss Rayson, who had been watching for their arrival, came fluttering out to meet them. She led them into a little side room off the great hall.

"Will you wait here, Father Doane?" she said. "No one will disturb you."

Then she touched a bell, and a neat old colored woman appeared.

"This is the boy, Martha," Miss Rayson said to her briefly.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Miss Eunice!" gasped Martha, staring open-eyed at Con. "Ef he ain't de berry spit of dear Marse Charlie,—de berry spit."

"Yes, yes," was the hurried answer "but keep quiet, Martha. Take him upstairs and dress him, as I told you, in that old velvet suit we found in the garret. And—and when I call you, Martha, bring him—to the library—to the old Madam."

**XXVI.—WITH GRANDMOTHER
AND FRIENDS**

THE great library of Elmwood was flooded with the fading sunlight. It brightened the filmy folds of the lace curtains, fell upon the books, the statues, the tapestries; it trembled through the fragrant shadows of the conservatory, spanned the fountain with broken rainbows, and kindled the smiling face of the boy of the picture into glow and life. But it seemed to pale pitifully as it fell upon the bowed white-haired woman that was seated in the cushioned chair before the portrait, her trembling hands clasped upon the gold headed cane needed to support her faltering steps. The mistress of Elmwood was not yet seventy, but sorrow and remorse had aged her far beyond her years. The worn, weary face, the sunken, yet restless eyes, were those of one to whom life had grown a burden almost too heavy

to bear. She lifted her head at the sound of a footfall beside her.

"Eunice," she said,—*"Eunice, I feared you were gone! You were so long away this morning I grew nervous, I—I am nervous still. Stay by me, child, don't leave me again. I feel as if something was coming upon me,—illness, death perhaps, Eunice."*

"Oh, no, dear Madam!" was the cheery answer. "The doctor was here yesterday, you know, and found you very well."

"The doctor, pouff!" said the old lady, scornfully. "What does he know of the things that kill,—breaking hearts, ruined lives, darkened souls! He can not cure them, Eunice. He can not give back peace and hope and love when they are lost,—forever lost."

"No, he can not, dear Madam!" (Miss Rayson had taken her stand behind the old lady and was gently smoothing her brow and hair.) "But there is One who can."

"Not now, Eunice,—not even if I dared ask Him. It is too late!"

"Ah, dear Madam, no! It is never too late for God's pity and mercy," was the low reply.

"It is too late for *me*," continued the

old Madam, harshly. "His judgment is upon me rightly, justly, Eunice. I have been hard, cold, pitiless, unforgiving. I shut love, even the holiest, purest, out of my heart, my life,—a mother's love. And I have been punished as I deserve, Eunice: left lonely, friendless, loveless." She paused, and then went on more calmly: "I—I had a letter from Arthur to-day, asking for money again. It is always money, money! I have been generous, more than generous, to him. I have given him a son's place in the past, in the future; and yet—yet I feel there is no warmth in his heart for me. Why does he stay in a strange land, Eunice? Why does he not return to cheer, to brighten my old age?"

"Because—because he is ungrateful, unworthy!" Eunice broke out indignantly. "Forgive me, dear Madam, but—but it is the truth. He is all undeserving of your kindness and affection."

"Affection!" echoed the old lady, grimly. "We won't call it *that*, Eunice. He is the rightful heir to the Nesbitt fortune, and I treat him as such; but it is not affection, child. I wish it were. I have a soft place in my heart for you;

but to all the rest of the world it is dead and cold,—dead, Eunice,—dead with my boy there. How beautiful he looks in the picture this evening! It is almost as if he were living, breathing, smiling at me. O God, if I could have kept him as he is there: no shadow on his young brow, no sadness in his eyes, no words of reproach or bitterness on his lips! If I could have kept him like that, Eunice!"

"Dear Madam, you could not," was the gentle answer. "We all must change, grow old, give place to the children who come after us."

"The children! Ah, yes, the children!" repeated the old Madam, wearily. "I have been listening to their shouts, their laughter on Mrs. Burnett's lawns. How they fill her home and her life, Eunice! If my boy's child had lived, it would have been different here."

"Very different indeed, dear Madam!" The gentle voice hesitated for a moment; then, still soothing with caressing fingers. Eunice continued: "I thought of that to-day, when I heard a story—such a strange story!—of a child who had been lost—lost for long years, like your son's little one,—and was found."

"Lost for years,—for long years!" repeated the older woman, with startled interest. "But, then, it was not like my loss,—the awful wreck, the dreadful fire!"

It was not often the old Madam's gentle guardian allowed these harrowing thoughts, but to-day she kept on:

"This child, too, was lost in a burning railroad wreck, even as yours, Madam,—lost, as all believed, hopelessly, forever."

"Oh, impossible," said the old woman, sharply; for the conversation was stirring the dull ache in her heart to keener pain,—
"unless—unless the child was some nameless beggar, without friends or family to look for him."

"He was not a nameless beggar, though this loss made him one," continued Miss Rayson. "He was born to friends, family, fortune, Madame. But he was in the care of one both cruel and wicked, who coveted his inheritance and—"

"You mean—you mean the child was stolen,—stolen from the wreck," said the old Madam, excitedly,—
"stolen by one in whose care he was, who coveted his fortune? Eunice, Eunice, what wild story is this you are telling? Whose story, Eunice?"

But a sudden clamor in the silent splendor of the house broke upon the eager question; the rush of young feet down the polished stairs, the sound of a boyish voice in the outer hall—

"I won't!" it cried. "I tell you I won't wear those shoes, you old black granny! They pinch my feet. Mister! Mister! Where is my Mister?"

And through the velvet portières of the library burst Mountain Con, flushed, breathless, shoeless; for the pinch of the satin pumps had stirred him into rebellion. But otherwise he was the "boy of the picture" in all his princely array.

"My God!" exclaimed the old Madam, starting to her trembling feet. "Am I dreaming, dying, Eunice?"

"O dear Madam, no, no!" sobbed Eunice, as she clasped the shaking, swaying figure in her arms, dismayed at this abrupt disclosure of her loving plan.

But the old woman broke fiercely from her gentle hold, and caught startled Con by the shoulders.

"Look at me," she panted,—*"look at me, and let me see if you are living or dead! Oh, it is my boy indeed,—my boy s*

face and eyes and hair! And yet—yet—oh, what are you,—who are you?"

"I—I'm Con," faltered the bewildered boy. "No, no I ain't either. I'm—I'm Charles Owen Nesbitt, the Mister says; and you—I guess you're my grandmother."

"Eunice, Eunice!" (It was Con's strong young arms that caught the tottering form, even as they had caught poor Mother Moll of old.) "Oh, is this true, Eunice? Was it my story you told me,—his—Arthur Nesbitt's? Is this my boy indeed,—my son's lost boy, Eunice? Is this my boy?"

"Dear Madam, yes, yes, this is your son's child, lost to you so cruelly! I thought to spare you the shock; to break the news to you more gently; to let you see him as the boy of the picture, and then question him yourself.—Here is Father Doane, who found him friendless, neglected in the Tennessee mountains, who learned his strange story, who has all the proofs."

"Proofs,—proofs? I need no proofs!" cried the old Madam. "My dead heart leaped into life at the sight of him, at the sound of his voice. This is my boy indeed,—my dead Charlie's lost boy!"

And the old Madam flung her arms

about Con and burst into the blessed tears which told that her heart had indeed leaped into love and life.

“There,—there!” said Con! “Don’t cry!” And the boyish voice sank into the soothing tone that of old had comforted Mother Moll. “Don’t cry, grandmother! I’ll be your boy, just as the Mister says. Don’t cry! You’re all right. I’m here for—for keeps, if you want me.” And Con, whose young heart had been kept soft and warm by the one saving touch of an old woman’s love, patted the withered cheek as he had patted Mother Moll’s of old. “Chirk up, — chirk up, grandmother!”

And grandmother did “chirk up” in a way wonderful to see. It was a straight, alert, wide-awake woman, with fully twenty years dropped from her age, who sat with her boy’s hand held tight in her own for the next hour, listening with flashing eyes to the story Father Phil told her,—reading Wilmot Elkins’ dying statement, hearing the testimony of Uncle Bill and Mother Moll, while her eager gaze turned again and again to the boy at her side,—the boy whose face and eyes and hair and smile were living

corroboration of his cruel story,—a proof more eloquent than words.

"I believe it all, all, *all, all*, without one shadow of doubt!" she said in passionate decision. "Father Doane, we will burn all these hideous papers with their foul record. As for Arthur Nesbitt," (the speaker tightened her clasp of Con's hand), "I—I will try to forgive him, as you say, Father. God knows I need forgiveness myself. I will not prosecute him. I will send him money to keep him from want; but—but I will never see or hear or, if possible, think of him again. All my life shall be given to undoing the wrong and evil he has wrought, and atoning to my poor boy for his unhappy past."

And that "grandmother" kept her word, none who know grandmothers can doubt. Perhaps the "unhappy past" for which she was trying to atone was not such an unhappy training after all; for it had made Charles Owen Nesbitt a strong, sturdy, sensible youngster, that all a wealthy grandmother's love and indulgence could not spoil. And there was Father Phil to watch, to guide, to lead, in these new ways,—Father Phil, whose

tender love and care for his little brother and pal never failed.

But perhaps that first summer as a "little gentleman," the heir and master of Elmwood, might have been rather awkward for Mountain Con if Lil's grandmother had not cleared things up wonderfully. That good lady, with her wide experience of boys and girls, insisted that Susie should spend her long vacation at Oakwood. And, with Susie and Lil, and some dozen more grandsons and nephews, full of kindly and active interest in Susie's "Con," it did not take long for a bright, wide-awake boy like Charles Owen Nesbitt to fit into the situation. He had his queer little ways, of course, at first; but, as Susie hotly declared when there was any criticism of her protégé, "You'd be queer yourselves, if you had been stolen away when you were babies and had to live with robbers and moon-shiners." And then followed narrations of Con's past that lifted him to a pinnacle of heroism which none of Susie's breathless listeners could ever hope to approach.

The "queer little ways," however, were soon smoothed away, and in a little while Master Charles Owen Nesbitt needed no

protection or defence. The silent splendor of Oakwood woke into life that rivalled Lil's grandmother's. The velvet lawns were turned into croquet grounds and tennis courts. There was a grey pony in the stable; and Dick, his long, lean frame rounded into fuller outlines, was the pride and boast of the neighborhood. For a while Con's school was a big sunny room in the brightest side of his home, with dear Miss Eunice as his teacher; for grandmother had flung away her gold-headed cane and was as active and energetic an old lady as any of her neighbors.

Afterwards came busier days for Charles Owen Nesbitt,—wider scenes, broader life and usefulness. The friends of his wild past were not forgotten. Peppo and Carita were lured from their gypsy tents into the management of a cattle ranch, where Zila (her old grandmother of the "evil eye" having passed away) and Tony are growing up in Christian ways and in the old Faith, to which the little gypsy mother had returned under Father Phil's guidance.

And Mother Moll? Con has been true to his promise. Up on one of the greenest slopes of Misty Mountain, Mother Moll

has a home beyond her wildest hopes and dreams,—a long, low-roofed cabin, with the bright hearth fire, the rag carpet, the cushioned rocker,—all the simple comforts that she asks or needs. Some day she hopes, their punishment done, her wild boys may come back to her. Meantime she walks the pleasant ways of Misty Mountain, with the fur-trimmed coat and bonnet, equal to Mrs. Murphy's; and boasts to her listening gossips of her lad, who, grand, elegant gentleman that he is now, never forgets her.

And at Christmas! Every Christmas there is high holiday at Misty Mountain. Father Phil is like a son of the Manse now. Uncle Greg has softened with the years; and Con, whose story had stirred the old soldier's heart into hot indignation, blended with not a little remorse, has won a place in it all his own,—a place second only to Susie's. So at Christmas the old Manse flings open wide its doors and welcomes them all back to its hospitable fireside.

And the log cabin is decked again with Christmas greens; and Aunt Aline brings out her treasures of lace and linen for the Christmas altar; and the voices of the singers fill the mountain silence as the

Christmas *Gloria* swells out into the night. But the outlawed, hunted boy, that once peered through the window, kneels a white-robed acolyte now at Father Phil's side.

"Who was that fine young fellow serving the Mass so devoutly?" asked a friend who was visiting Dr. Murphy. "He does not look as if he belonged up in your mountain wilds."

"Well, he doesn't now. Nevertheless, he was raised up here, and we claim him as a first-class product," added the Doctor, with a smile. "That is Charles Owen Nesbitt, the young multi-millionaire of N——. Up here, though, we give him another name: it is Con of Misty Mountain."

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